In March 1995, Michael Smith (fictitious name) paid $490,000 for a 1981 Beech Duke aircraft. A bargain, thought Smith, a retired fighter pilot with a long-time passion for aerial photography who had just retired from the Navy. In the summer of 1999, Smith scheduled one of his favorite flights over the Pacific Coast. As usual, he stuck two fingers into the tank to ensure fuel was at the top, before departing the local county airport. Winds were calm, and visibility was high. “The perfect conditions to shoot,” thought Smith, while he and his wife were getting ready for an exciting photo session.

Forty minutes into the flight, Smith noticed the engine was emitting a lower pitch sound, not the high pitch sound he was used to hearing. He scanned his gauges, only to discover that his fuel had dropped to zero. In total disbelief, Smith looked at the wings, convinced he would see fuel pouring out of some sort of fuel tank rupture. But to his horror and dismay, there was no leakage. With no airport nearby, the engine came to a complete stop. Incredibly, Smith managed to land on a hard dirt road just besides a large cotton field.

What could have possibly gone wrong? In the report that he submitted to the Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) Smith indicated the following:

It is obvious that I was complacent and inattentive, my thoughts on the photo work. My strong expectation was to find full tanks,

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1 ASRS is a NASA program that compiles data about near miss accidents to identify and prevent risk factors. The program’s web site can be accessed at http://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/.
and somehow believed I felt gas at the top. That I didn’t visually confirm it, and didn’t check the fuel quantity indicators becomes more unbelievable every time I think about it.

Sometimes, accidents of this kind are the result of incompetence or experience deficit. But this forced landing was the first disturbing incident ever experienced by Smith in thirty one years of flying, much of it as a Navy pilot. Clearly, this accident was not related to poor training. It was a problem of attention. Smith had looked at the trip as just another routine flight, something he had done thousands of times in the past. He had stuck two fingers into the tank and felt safe, but this heuristic was so automatic that it was heavily susceptible to mindlessness on his part. Without ever realizing it, Smith had set himself mentally not to pay as much attention as he should to flying and navigating the aircraft. All of his thoughts were focused, instead, on the photo-job.

Unfortunately, there is no such thing as an ordinary trip. Flying an aircraft, like managing a global company, requires the full engagement of every pilot’s mind. How many firms have crashed internationally because their top executives could not give global markets all the attention they deserved? In a world of perpetual “infoglut,” paying attention to international business matters is often down the list of priorities for many managers. The results can potentially be catastrophic.

This chapter accomplishes several tasks that provide the foundation for the rest of this study. It starts by discussing the motivation of this research; namely, the impact that globalization exerts on MNEs and their top management teams. A new conceptualization of global mindset is then put forward. The proposed theoretical approach consists of going beyond the study of cognitive maps to investigate, instead, the day-to-day behaviors of MNE top executives. This approach makes it possible to find out whether and how managers at the top pay careful attention – as a group – to international issues in their decision-making activities. This attention focus is argued to constitute a critical manifestation of a global mindset that possesses important implications for MNEs. The remainder of this chapter presents the research methodology, key summary results, and a brief research outline.