

# Avoid digital distractions

By Jane Piper

**M**odern technology including smartphones, email and social media, are having a major impact on the way people think, work, communicate and collaborate. Many, including coaches, struggle to manage the pressure of the triple whammy of being available 24/7, expected to respond immediately and overwhelmed by the high volume of emails and information.

The reality of most people's daily lives is that they never get a chance to get into flow, or even have a period of uninterrupted time to focus on one thing at work or at home. A survey by CEB (2017) of 908 middle to senior managers revealed that 80% of their time is spent in meetings, checking emails or searching for information.

In a world full of information and interruption, finding the time to switch off, be fully present and reflect is becoming very rare, even a luxury. Part of the coach's role is to create an environment for reflection and thinking, not just during the coaching session, but also during clients' daily lives.

### MOTIVATION AND ATTENTION

As we know from work by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi about flow states, when people are motivated and engaged in what they're doing, they can focus for a long period of time.

As coaches we need to be experts in understanding human motivation – increasing the latter helps boost attention and focus.

### Make it work

#### ● The Pomodoro technique

I recommend to clients the tried-and-tested Pomodoro Technique (thus called because it used a clockwork kitchen timer in the shape of a tomato to set 25 minutes for uninterrupted focused work). I call it Airplane Mode because our main interruption tends to be our phone. Even the buzz of a phone near us is enough to break our focus and it takes 23 minutes to return to full concentration on the task (Torres, 2015).

Likewise, computer notifications have to be turned off or the programs shut down to avoid interruptions. In Airplane Mode the timer of the phone still works and can be set to 25 minutes. For those 25 minutes the client focuses, uninterrupted, on one task only. With practice the time can slowly be increased from 25 to 50 minutes.

#### ● Seek out 'real work'

As Amabile (2013) found by reviewing 12,000 work diary entries from 238 employees, the main motivational buzz comes when a person feels they have made progress.

To boost motivation, help your clients prioritise so they can spend time to get some real value-add work done, making progress towards bigger goals, undertaking tasks that require

Steer clear of digital distractions if you want to increase your wellbeing and productivity.

Jane Piper reports

cognitive thinking, creative design, problem solving or planning.

### Fatal flaws

In a working week where 80% of time is caught up with emails, meetings and multitasking (CEB survey, 2017), it's important to actively set aside time for 'real work'. Failing to do so means not only a decrease in productivity but also missing out on motivational boosts. Failing to put in barriers to constant interruptions leaves people feeling demotivated as they get to the end of the day, wondering what they've really achieved.

### DIGITAL OR BUSY ADDICTION?

Digital detox is a new term in our vocabulary. It implies addiction, although this may not be the case clinically. Addiction or a problematic relationship with phones, video games or the Internet, like most addictions, is probably a symptom of other issues. In the workplace it is the obsession with being busy that keeps people hooked on their phones.

After decades of restructuring, rightsizing and workforce reductions, the culture is one where everyone's always making sure they're seen to be busy or crazy-busy. No one dares admit to a colleague or boss that they're under-loaded or under capacity.

Being available online all the time shows the boss and colleagues you're busy. Responding quickly at all hours



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is seen as a positive, showing we're 'service orientated'.

In a survey of 1,000 UK workers by *HR Magazine*, 31% admitted to sending emails outside office hours to impress bosses. While checking a few work emails from time to time over the weekend may not seem a big deal, attention residue means the thoughts about work remain on the mind for much longer, making it hard to rest and relax – with chronic stress and burnout more likely.

### Make it work

One option is a total 'digital detox' – cold turkey – which is hard as most people use their phone to keep in touch with family or significant others.

A few less radical options:

#### ● Digital diet

Assess the extent of the problem by looking at Screen Time. Look at the apps on which you've spent most of the time. Are there apps that don't bring

happiness, or that waste your time? Remove temptation and delete them

#### ● Digital control

Take back control and look at your apps when you choose, not when you receive a notification. (Go to 'Settings', then 'Notifications' and turn them off)

#### ● Digital 'Do Not Disturb'

Use the Do Not Disturb function and set times so that calls and notifications are silenced between, eg, 10.30pm and 6am.

### CONCLUSION

Helping our clients develop a healthy relationship with technology and stick to agreed working hours is increasingly part of our role. To improve self-awareness, performance and creativity, we need head space and time away from distractions and constant interruptions. This can be achieved with clear goals, practice and a few simple but effective techniques.

Next time you reach to answer that 'ping' at 10pm, don't forget that

you need to be a role model for your clients, too. 📱

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