

FOCUS IN THE AGE OF DISTRACTION

In an era of information overload, it is harder than ever to find the headspace to focus and concentrate. Jane Piper outlines ways to improve our personal performance and manage organisational expectations.

Hardly a day goes by when we don't hear about how work will change in the future, from driverless cars, artificial intelligence (AI), robots and digitalisation. Most of the discussion has been on what work we will be doing in the future. Much less is being discussed on *how* we will be working in the future.

How organisations measure and manage work has essentially not changed since the 19th century. A legacy of an industrial era means most

organisations still control and measure the hours people are working. In a knowledge area, where it's brain power not brawn, then hours do not equal performance or productivity.

With knowledge work—such as preparing a strategic plan, writing a compelling presentation or finding the solution a problem—spending more time will not necessarily improve the outcome. What will improve productivity is the ability to focus and concentrate at a personal level and for organisations to manage expectations around hours.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

In the information era it is harder than ever to find the headspace to focus and concentrate. The sheer amount of information available has exploded, doubling every 12 months. The average employee estimates they get 112 emails a day and spend 28 percent of working time processing them.

However, reading and responding to emails only adds seven to eight percent of the value to their work, according to a report from McKinsey (*The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies*).

Information is not just waiting for us to stumble across it. It is pushed at us constantly through tweets, emails, Facebook, LinkedIn, SMS and WhatsApp. People are so worried that they might be missing out (FOMO) they've become addicted to checking their smartphones once every 12 minutes, according to recent US research.

The real question is how much of this information is adding value and increasing knowledge. Much of the information is dumbed down to tweetable chunks, eye-catching taglines and 'info-entertainment'. This is the information equivalent of junk food. It might feel you are learning something, but it is light, superficial and the constant distraction is affecting our ability to work in a focused way.

PERSONAL MIND HACKS

To improve our personal productivity and performance we need to give ourselves the head space to be able to concentrate and work in a focused way on value-adding tasks. While our attention spans may be decreasing in a world of information overload, the good news is that it is not irreversible. A few

simple hacks can help you to focus and improve your personal productivity and performance.

1. Deal with digital distraction.

It is surprisingly irresistible, and eventually addictive, to check every ping, beep and ring of your smartphone. It takes willpower to resist responding immediately to these alerts. Willpower takes your mental energy and focus away from the task you want to be working on. Take away the temptation and take control by turning off all your alerts. You decide when you want to respond to your emails or review your Twitter feed.

2. Single task don't multi-task.

Multi-tasking is a misleading phrase. Multi-tasking is not working on two or three tasks simultaneously, but quickly shifting attention from one task to another.

Humans have limited capacity to process information. Multi-tasking has a negative impact on tasks that require concentration and problem solving. If the tasks are not important then you might get away with it, eg, watching TV while skim reading the newspaper. But if you want to be productive on some challenging work, then you need to focus on one task at a time.

The fragmentation of your attention is also not very psychologically satisfying. It leaves you feeling like you haven't achieved much by the end of your day as you've jumped from task to task. Leaving tasks unfinished means they are hanging in the back of your mind.

3. Get into airplane mode.

Our attention span is typically about 20-50 minutes. Like a muscle, it can improve with training. Every day, set aside one or two chunks of time (20-50 minutes) in your diary to do focused work on challenging tasks. Choose tasks that are value adding.

Make sure you deal with your digital distraction first. Put your phone in airplane mode. Shut down the email on your PC. Then set the timer on your phone for somewhere between 20-50 minutes. Then focus on the task. At the end of the time, think about what you've achieved and feel that buzz of progress on an important task. Pure motivation. Then repeat.

MANAGE ORGANISATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Productivity is not only a personal issue, but also an organisational issue. The culture of an organisation strongly influences the expectations that employees have about the hours they are working and their productivity.

Leaders set the tone and expectation about working hours. Managers working long hours sends a signal that long hours are what are required to get ahead in the organisation.

There is a ripple effect when managers send emails on a Sunday evening as one study showed. In one example, 10 emails sent by a manager on a Sunday evening resulted in his or her team members each working an average of 15 minutes on Sunday. This happened even though the manager believed there was no expectation that the team should respond over the weekend.

In some organisations, people are answering emails after hours to prove they are working hard. Another survey of the UK finance industry found that 31 percent workers admitted to sending emails outside office hours to impress their boss.

Worst of all, 12 percent admitted that the emails they sent out of hours were pointless, and four percent scheduled them to make it look like they were working later than they really were. This creates stress for other employees who also feel they have respond after hours to keep up.

Long hours are the norm in some industries like management consulting. Even they are finding long hours are not the key to productivity. Boston Consulting Group, for example, ran an experiment where they required a group of consultants to take one evening off a week and found their productivity improved.

As a people manager, it is important to be a role model and to manage the expectations about hours and productivity:

- **Set clear expectations.** Be clear with your team on your expectations for sending and responding out of normal working hours, eg, if there is

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an urgent issue over the weekend or during the evening then phone, don't send emails.

- **Delay emails until Monday.** If you, as a manager, work weekends then set up a delay so the emails go out on Monday morning.
- **Vacations are off.** Arrange for coverage when you and your team members are on vacation. You can't expect a person to switch off if no one is delegated to cover their work while they are away. Also, it can be a good opportunity to give someone the chance to step up or broaden their skills for a few weeks.
- **Share the pain of global time shifts.** If there are regular team meetings across time zones, often the head office dictates that the meeting is

done at a time that is convenient in their time zone. The other regions then have to join early morning or late at night. Move the regular meetings around so not always the same people who have to give up their evening or start early.

- **Recognise performance output not time input.** Look at what you are recognising and rewarding your team members for and make sure it's what they achieved and how they performed that is recognised, not how many hours they have put in.

FOCUS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In an era of information overload, managing our focus and attention will increase our personal productivity. As

a leader you are a role model, shaping the culture to be where employees have the opportunity to concentrate on value-adding thinking work.

With a future approaching fast where more and more manual and basic processing work will be undertaken by robots and AI, then it is time to change how we manage and measure work performance. Hours are not an accurate measure of productivity and longer hours will not increase organisational and personal productivity.

ET

JANE PIPER is an organisational psychologist and the author of *Focus in the Age of Distraction* (Panoma Press).



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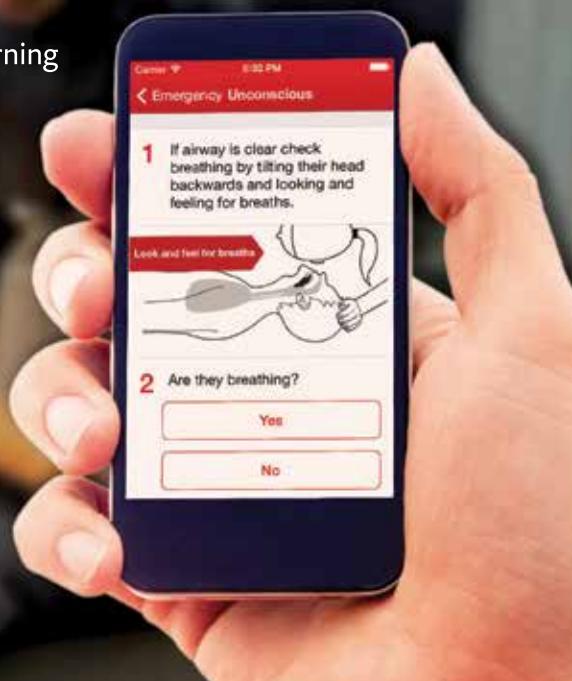
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