

INFORMATION OVERLOAD – MANAGING MODERN DISTRACTIONS

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OUR WORK ENVIRONMENT

In today's digital age, we face an overwhelming number of distractions. Consider this: 150 emails, 50 instant messages, 20 telephone calls, 15 walk-in interruptions, 25 social media notifications, and 50 email or internet curiosity breaks. That's a total of 310 digital interruptions in a single day, averaging an interruption every 1.55 minutes! Studies indicate that the average American worker is interrupted every 2-3 minutes. In 2015, the average American worker checked Facebook 21 times per day, took 74 email curiosity breaks, and switched tasks on a computer 564 times a day. With these numbers, it's incredible that we accomplish any deep-level project work.

A Microsoft study found that it takes 15 minutes to return to work after an electronic-based interruption. If we are interrupted every 2-3 minutes and it takes 15 minutes to refocus, how do we get anything done? This is why we often see only 2 hours of billable time on our timesheets at 5 pm, despite feeling like we've worked a 14-hour day.

The reality is that we live in an age of information overload. We are constantly connected to the world and inundated with information. We sleep with our smartphones ... we are surrounded by 24-hour news networks ... social media ... tablet computers ... we can't escape. This is why very smart people underperform. Do you ever wonder why your head is in a constant cloud and you are unable to focus? It is called **Attention Deficit Trait (ADT)**, and it is becoming a world-wide epidemic.

ADT is a **relative** of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), but it is very different in that ADD has a genetic component. ADT does not. **ADT is environmentally induced, and in today's age of information overload, those environmental factors are technology-based. In other words, ADT is a condition that is in large part caused by the technology and connectivity that we love so much.** Yes, the very technology that we love so much is causing us to walk around with foggy brains and causing us to underperform. The scary part is that no one knows the long-term effects of information overload. However, some shorter-term studies suggest that the problem is getting worse. More recent studies show that it takes slightly over 23 minutes to return to the work we were performing at the time of a digital interruption.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

We need to rethink and realign our relationship with technology. While technology is essential and beneficial, it can negatively impact productivity and personal life. We can combat ADT and improve focus by addressing four key areas:

PERSONAL HEALTH

Physical and mental health are crucial. When we are fit, well-rested, and healthy, we can conquer anything. Conversely, overeating and sleep deprivation can hinder our ability to concentrate. Mental health is equally important; it's challenging to be productive when dealing with depression or personal relationship issues. Consider hiring a personal trainer and seeing a therapist or life coach to improve physical and mental health.

WORKPLACE HEALTH

A negative or unhealthy work environment can make it difficult to focus. Improving workplace health is essential. Two recommended books for this are [Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#) and [The Advantage](#) by Patrick Lencioni.

TIME, TASK, AND EMAIL MANAGEMENT

We need an effective system to process digital and human interruptions and organize tasks and information. Without a system, we operate in chaos. Studies show that if we do not have an effective task management system to capture our tasks and file that information, we continue to worry about those things, which has an enormous impact on our ability to focus.

Tools like Microsoft Outlook and smartphones can help manage this information. Legal document management systems like NetDocuments, iManage, or OpenText can be extremely helpful for legal professionals.

ATTENTION MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Here are five practical attention management tips:

TURN OFF ALL NOTIFICATIONS

Notifications are distractions. Turn off all notifications on your devices.

- In Outlook, email notifications can be turned off by navigating to File > Options > Mail and deselecting the four different methods of notifying you when a new message arrives.
- On an iPhone, go to Settings > Notifications and go through and turn off notifications by App.

PRACTICE SINGLE TASKING

Focus on one task at a time. Clear your desk and multiple monitors of unrelated information.

For example, you should always minimize Outlook on your second monitor unless you are batch processing emails, planning your upcoming tasks, or using that information for the task that you are performing. Why would you leave up on your beautiful 27" screen the single most chaotic distraction known to man in the 21st century ... Email. That is insane if you think about it.

Email feeds us distraction bombs every 30 seconds to 5 minutes. How can we possibly focus if we see those bombs land in our inbox? Just because we have 2 or 3 monitors, doesn't mean that we need to have something displayed on them, especially if the information displayed derails our ability to focus on the task in front of us!

POMODORO TECHNIQUE

Work in intervals, such as 25 minutes of focused work followed by a 5-minute break. Adjust the intervals as needed.

The human brain functions very well, maintaining attention to a single task for 25 minutes. After 25 minutes, we begin to lose focus. By giving ourselves a 5 minute break, we can return to deep-thought work for another 25 minutes very easily. Feel free to adjust the 25 minutes to something a bit longer if you want. I know a lot of folks who work 40 minutes or longer and take a 5-10 minute break. This technique will make a huge impact on productivity and will also help combat procrastination. Think about it, we can endure even the most tedious dreaded task for 25 minutes, right? Once we get a little momentum going and we get immersed in the project, it becomes a lot easier.

TACKLE DEEP-THOUGHT WORK EARLY

Engage in deep-thought work early in the day or when rested, as our brains function better after quiet time or sleep.

We also know that we can be highly productive while the rest of the world is sleeping because there are far fewer (if any) interruptions. This can be one of the most productive times of the day.

CREATE RITUALS

Establish small checklists or schedules to execute desired tasks consistently. Rituals help form positive habits, and prevent distractions, and keep you on task.

As an example, a partner's morning administrative ritual could look something like this:

- Eat breakfast at my desk (oatmeal)
- Reach out to one new organization for business development
- Ask a potential client or existing client to grab coffee in a city when I'm traveling
- Review my potential new client report
- Reach out to past clients without active matters just to check in
- Check in on recent clients/projects
- Business social media
- Birthday wishes
- Check in with my leadership team members
- Check in with my partners
- Check in with my immediate team

Rituals also remind us to do things that we frequently forget ... things that we commit ourselves to do as New Year resolutions or annual goals. By adding rituals and checklists into your life, you can greatly enhance your ability to focus and do those things that seem to always fall off our radar. I discovered an awesome App for the iPhone/iPad called [Simple Checklist](#) to organize all my daily rituals.