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# Difficult Art of Managing Attention

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*“If there is any one “secret” to effectiveness, it is concentration.”*  
*Peter Drucker, Effective Executive*



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## Introduction

When Little Prince landed at the fifth planet, he saw a Lamplighter, who was constantly turning off and on a Lamp. The little prince asked the Lamplighter why he lights and puts out the lamp with such high frequency. The lamplighter responded that his planet has turned faster and faster each year, and now he has no time to rest between lighting and snuffing the lamp. Many times throughout my day I feel the same about the need to regularly check my phone, even before getting to sleep. During my ordinary day I am sitting at my desk, trying to focus on university assignment with an imminent deadline. My phone rings and I am noticing Facebook notification on screen. My friend asks about my plans for tomorrow. I try to ignore the message, but it is too tempting. Ten minutes after that, I hear the familiar sound of an email arriving in my inbox. Maybe it is urgent so I decide to take a quick look, but once I am in my inbox, I see something that came in yesterday and I entirely forgot about it. My effectiveness is significantly lower when I am distracted by phone or e-mail arriving at my inbox.

As stated by Deloitte in Mobile Consumer Survey 2018 64% of respondents said that their personal smartphone usage at work distracts them<sup>1</sup>. According to Cisco by 2020 there will be 50 billion devices online, which means that online devices will outnumber people on individual level<sup>2</sup>. One human will on average own six devices with internet access at it looks like the problem of “technological distraction” will only grow in the future. Interruption scientist Gloria Mark from the University of California conducted a study, which proved that interrupted performance comes with higher stress, frustration, workload, effort and pressure<sup>3</sup>. With development of Internet of Things the number of technological devices in our surrounding will increase. For knowledge workers nowadays it is crucial to practice attention management in order to be effective and create value. There is a prompt need to teach effectiveness and concentration in a world full of distractions more than ever before.

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<sup>1</sup> Deloitte Mobile Consumer Survey, 2018, [<https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/mobile-consumer-survey.html>]

<sup>2</sup> Cisco White Paper, The Internet of Things - How the Next Evolution of the Internet Is Changing Everything 2011, [[https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/en\\_us/about/ac79/docs/innov/IoT\\_IBSG\\_0411FINAL.pdf](https://www.cisco.com/c/dam/en_us/about/ac79/docs/innov/IoT_IBSG_0411FINAL.pdf)]

<sup>3</sup> Gloria Mark, Department of Informatics University of California, “The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress” [<https://www.ics.uci.edu/~gmark/chi08-mark.pdf>]

*“Computers make it easier to do a lot of things, but most of the things they make it easier to do don't need to be done.”*

*Andy Rooney*

## What is the cause and cost of distraction?

Distraction caused by technological device is something, that I believe everyone at some point had a chance to experience. Nir Eyal in his book called “Hooked” to describes how product designers can use psychological tricks to create habit-forming products. Personal technology is based on habit-forming design. Habits are behaviours done with little or none conscious thought. It all simply starts with a “trigger”. Buttons such as “click here” or “play again” encourage us to take actions, that we do not necessary want to. Next we take action that occurs as habit like scrolling through Facebook, watching YouTube videos or checking Twitter without knowing how much time we spend on it. It is hard to break the habit of checking our devices, social media and it might significantly decrease our productivity and makes us less concentrated on our priorities.

At University of Texas in Austin scientist conducted interesting study. Participants were asked to take a series of tests that required full concentration and during them their cognitive capacity was measured. Before the tests started, researchers instructed all participants to switch phones to airplane mode. Participants were randomly assigned to put their smartphones either on the desk face down, in their pocket or personal bag, or in another room. During the study researchers discovered that participants who left their phones in another room performed better than those with their phones physically close while taking the test<sup>4</sup>. Even looking at our phone while taking the test decreases our concentration, which leads to worse results.

Today, knowledge workers use equipment and platforms we would not have dreamed of several years ago. Being our most productive and effective in this information-rich, ever-changing workplace full of distractions coming at a high pace is not intuitive. Without the ability to manage our attention on priorities our quality of work can simply decline taking down also our productivity. In “The Procrastination Economy: The Big Business of Downtime” Ethan Tussey even compares Mark Zuckerberg to Pavlov, because in his opinion Facebook has similar effect on us that dogs showed during famous Pavlov study. The author emphasizes that entertainment companies fight for our attention and monetize our unproductive time. The most important question is: *Do we really want to waste our time and pay with our time?*

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<sup>4</sup> Adrian F. Ward, Kristen Duke, Ayelet Gneezy, and Maarten W. Bos, University of Texas in Austin, Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One’s Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity [https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/691462]

*“A man paints with his brains and not with his hands”*

Michelangelo

## What can we learn from master of attention – Renaissance artists Michelangelo?

In 1508 Pope Julius II was deciding who should paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo definitely was not the first choice candidate. He was well-known as a sculptor in Rome and Florence, but his painting experience was limited. The pope clearly believed that Michelangelo talent and potential matter more than experience and wanted to give him this “impossible to complete” task. The artist refused to take the job at first, claiming that he wants to focus on sculpting, rather than painting. In order to persuade Michelangelo, Julius II promised to give him also prestigious order for 40 massive figures for his tomb, a project that was more attractive for Michelangelo given his previous works<sup>5</sup>.

Though Michelangelo had never painted frescoes before Sistine Chapel he has chosen to work with the most difficult method of painting fresco – Buon Fresco, which was a method used by technique masters. He learned the method as he worked on ceiling paintings. In short, the Buon Fresco is painting with pigment ground in the water on intonaco, which is a thin layer of wet, fresh plaster. The method is one of the most difficult because the paintings have to be done quickly, without any mistakes and it requires 100% attention devoted to painting<sup>6</sup>. Additionally he had to learn extremely difficult techniques in perspective for painting figures on curved surfaces that appear correct when viewed from almost 60 feet below.

The painting of Chapel ceiling started in July of 1508 and lasted to October of 1512. The ceiling is around 40 meters (131 feet) long by 13 meters (43 feet) wide. Michelangelo painted more than 5,000 square feet of frescoes paintings. During the work he faced many difficulties and sometimes he was not even sure if Julius II will pay for his work due to war and his illness<sup>7</sup>. The setback have not discouraged him from painting of the greatest place in Rome. When I visited Rome and Sistine Chapel I was amazed by the ceiling paintings. I believe that in order to create masterpiece not only in art, but also create value as a knowledge worker our attention has to be devoted to the task we do in a certain moment. As Michelangelo said that artist paints with their brain and it is also true that knowledge workers contribute by creating value, making decisions and using their creativity.

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<sup>5</sup> Shelley Esaak, “7 Things You Didn't Know About the Sistine Chapel” [<https://www.thoughtco.com/shelley-esaak-182367>]

<sup>6</sup> Britannica, Fresco Painting [<https://www.britannica.com/art/fresco-painting>]

<sup>7</sup> Shelley Esaak, “7 Things You Didn't Know About the Sistine Chapel” [<https://www.thoughtco.com/shelley-esaak-182367>]

*“The knowledge worker cannot be supervised closely or in detail. He can only be helped. But he must direct himself, and he must direct himself toward performance and contribution, that is, toward effectiveness.”*

Peter Drucker

## Drucker's view

Today many executives create an environment that undermines focus. The products of knowledge workers are creativity, ideas, decisions, information, and communication. All of these require extended periods of sustained concentration and attention. However, many offices have a culture in which all communication, regardless of the subject or source, carries the same level of presumed urgency and is expected to produce an immediate response. Peter Drucker plays an important role here with his book “Effective Executive”. He wrote that effectiveness can and must be learned.

Firstly, it is important to know your time. As Peter Drucker recommended recording time, managing time, and consolidating the time are crucial for personal effectiveness. After that, take look at where your attention goes. Managing attention is important as today's managers often feel they are in a constant state of distraction, as emails flood their inboxes, meetings overpack their calendars, and new notifications appear on their phones. When thanks to Screen Time I was able to track how much time I spend on my phone I was struck. On average week I have spend 3 hours and 15 minutes on my phone. In one month it is more than 900 hours, which I could dedicate to more meaningful things. For me tracking the time of my activities, especially those related to smartphone changed my way of thinking about personal technologies and productivity.

Successful time management means trying to find a way to focus attention on just one task and being focused on it for longer periods of time: “Do first things first, and second things not at all.” Quite a demanding and challenging task for most knowledge workers, thanks to distractions, interruptions, and the encouragement from leadership to multitask. But being aware of these attention-takers, and teaching yourself some steps to both manage and overcome them, can minimize their impact. “There was Mozart, of course,” Drucker wrote. “He could, it seems, work on several compositions at the same time, all of them masterpieces. But he is the only known exception. The other prolific composers of the first rank – Bach, for instance, Handel, or Haydn, or Verdi – composed one work at a time. Executives can hardly assume that they are executive Mozart”. Succeeding with attention management requires tracking time, persistence of breaking unproductive habits and a huge amount of self-reflection. If we chose to commit to building productive habits it will get easier to fight distractions ultimately feel better and more accomplished at the end of every active days.

*"Our problems in technology, in politics, wherever, are human problems. From the garden of Eden to today, it is our humanity that got us into this mess and it is our humanity that's going to have to get us out."*

Tim Cook

## How companies and even governments can help with combating technological distractions?

Technological advancement and products have many productivity benefits, but as I mentioned before it also become a source of frequent distraction and has led to our 24 hour and 7 day work schedule. Downtime and breaks are critical for knowledge workers. In 2016 United Kingdom created National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work lead by Sir Cary Cooper – professor of organisational psychology and health at Manchester Business School. It gathers large employers Shell, Rolls-Royce, Microsoft, John Lewis Partnership, GSK Twitter and government. The Forum is great as an example of ecosystem of organizations gathered for one goal – in case of National Forum for Health and Wellbeing it is to show that “good health is good for business, good business is good for health”<sup>8</sup>.

Accenture one of the leading professional service company providing strategy, consulting, digital, technology and operations introduced project called “Truly Human” in order create a great place to work in the digital age. “Truly Human” is based on four pillars: body – physically energized, mind – mentally focused, heart – connections and a sense of belonging, soul – having a sense of purpose. The project is more than another employer-branding campaign. The company invited Jay Shetty and recorded coaching videos with his advice and company employees. It is not only about videos. Some offices offer mindfulness training or yoga classes. Most importantly employees are encouraged to not check e-mails outside of work. The goal is to encourage practical self-reflect on individual ways of working and make small suggestions in order to help employees with practice of sustainable high performance to help individuals feel physically energized, mentally focused with a sense of belonging and purpose<sup>9</sup>. I believe that every company should direct employees, with guidance on how to combat distractions and create productive habits just like Accenture does.

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<sup>8</sup> Wellbeing at Work Forum Swells to Membership Over 35 Major Global Companies [<https://www.mbs.ac.uk/news/wellbeing-at-work-forum-swells-to-membership-of-over-35-major-global-companies/>]

<sup>9</sup> Accenture, Shaping Truly Human Era [<https://www.accenture.com/us-en/blogs/blogs-bill-lesieur-shaping-truly-human-era>]

*“It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important.”*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

## Summary

Technological products and their advancements are neither good or bad by their nature. They serve as tool, which we should use to enhance our productivity, but not to be distracted by them. In order to be really effective these days we have to ask ourselves *if technology is serving me or do I serve technology?* I believe that attention management is the most important skill in XXI century. Peter Drucker and his teaching leaves us with hope that we can learn effectiveness and improve ourselves by applying principles from his classic book *Effective Executive*. Wasting time on unproductive activities makes those activities important. Today we are responsible for our effectiveness and we have to clearly know what we choose to concentrate our attention on. Developing habits that are productive is the most challenging tasks of knowledge workers nowadays. “A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention” said Herbert Simon. Knowledge workers and companies should move towards situation, where advantages of technology at workplace outweighs the disadvantages.

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