

Lost in Digital Wonderland – Finding opportunities for reflection in the digital age

Digital technologies have made life much more convenient, fast-paced and richer during the past twenty years, and it has the potential to make our lives even more so in the future. But as our use of digital technologies mature we collectively need to get better in learning when *not* to use digital technologies. I believe it is a management task to put structures in place that enables the future knowledge worker to immerse himself in asking and answering challenging questions uninterrupted while at the same time leveraging on the amazing opportunities that digital technology presents.

By Joachim Meyer Andersen

I have a confession to make: I am addicted to distractions. Whether at home or at work I seldom get to indulge myself in one single activity for an extended period of time without being disturbed by *something* – e-mails popping up on my screen sporadically, colleagues pinging me on Skype or my phone's seemingly constant vibrations with reminders about birthdays of people I never talk to and apps which I never use. And if I don't get disturbed from these (somewhat) involuntarily distractions I tend to distract myself throughout the day, putting pictures of the food I eat on Instagram and getting frequently updated on important breaking news such as the health of Beyoncé and Jay Z's marriage or Jennifer Aniston's wedding plans.

I have a suspicion that I am not the only one getting distracted. In fact it seems like these digital distractions has become a worldwide epidemic as smartphones and other digital devices has become ubiquitous among us. This development is not without its consequences: In our personal lives we risk losing the ability to listen carefully and be authentic and empathetic toward our close ones. In our professional lives I believe that these distractions can undermine our ability to effectively ask and answer the questions that is needed in order to drive great performance and breakthrough innovations. We risk running around like headless chickens in our corporate suits and dresses, seemingly being very busy and stressed out on the surface, but not taking the time out to ask whether or not what we are pushing ourselves so hard on truly is *that* important. Or whether we are just being busy and stressed out simply because we have not set time aside for some uninterrupted work and reflection. As with many other things, Peter Drucker was ahead of his time when he stated that it is useless to do efficiently that which should not be done at all. One should take

the necessary time out to ask important questions concerning what is important and what is not. *“Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action”.*

Do not get me wrong, I am a big believer in the power of digital technologies to make our lives better. Ever since I first laid hands on a Game Boy when I was 4 years old, I have been fascinated by the possibilities in digital technologies, and I have with wonder throughout my upbringing observed how technology has transformed the way we communicate, play and work. Today I cannot even imagine how it must have been like to work without access to digital technology. I am not one of those purists who preach that we should all abandon our stressful digital lives, go ‘back to nature’ and move into a cabin deep in to the woods without access to running water, electricity or any other modern utilities. This is not an all or nothing dilemma – we *can* have our cake and eat it too. But we have to eat the cake with caution and guidance.

Becoming a more reflective company in the digital age

While it definitely is a personal responsibility not to let ourselves get too digitally distracted from our important relationships with family and friends, I firmly believe that it should be a management task to put structures in place that makes it easier for the future knowledge worker to use digital technologies appropriately, thus enabling her to immerse herself in creative problem-solving uninterrupted. Management is about enabling the potential in people, and that is why directing the use of digital technologies becomes important as well. This does not mean that the digital behavior of employees should be controlled; rather, behavior should be directed and motivated in the right direction. The journey to become a company truly capable of valuable long-term thinking and reflection is long, but there are some concrete steps which managers can take in order to begin the journey forward:

- 1. A strong culture around the use of digital should be nurtured if it is not already present within the company.** Creating a strong company culture around the use of digital devices is hard work and requires deliberate action taken by management. Companies should have a well-communicated policy regarding the use of digital devices, especially concerning the work sessions which are creative in nature, and management should take the lead with regards to using digital devices appropriately. Consider the following:
 - a. Ask yourself what you as a leader consider appropriate digital behavior.* For instance, when is it OK for your employees to browse around on news websites and social media during work hours? The answer to this question may vary hugely depending on the context and

the person you ask, but nonetheless it is important to have that discussion with your colleagues.

- b. Why not make it a habit for meeting participants to put the phone on flight or 'do not disturb' mode at the start of every meeting? And why not make it a known habit to do the same when you and your colleagues are about to begin some work that requires deep, uninterrupted thinking?* Even vibrating phones can become a distraction to what one is working on. Yes, there will probably be some missed calls, some more important than others, but why can these calls not wait until after the meeting has taken place? Why is it considered OK to undermine the importance of the present moment?

This does not mean that the use of digital devices should be eliminated, but they should by and large be used as an instrument for creativity and not as an instrument for distraction. It is important to stress that I am not arguing for micromanagement of employees' behavior, but I am arguing for a clear policy and for open discussions around the issue.

- 2. Proper time should be set aside for asking and answering the right questions, both individually and on a team level.** Time for reflection should be a planned activity in a company – otherwise the good intentions will very quickly fade away. This reflection should happen both on an individual and a collective level.

- a. Individually.* Encourage your employees to set time aside for a 10-15 minute reflection session at the start of every working week with the computer and smartphone turned off. This session could for instance be facilitated by a question given by the company which the employee should attempt to answer thoughtfully. Another instrument is to offer classes which give the opportunity for the employees to reflect upon themselves and their work situation. Google has for some years done just that through their very popular 'Search Inside Yourself' classes where employees learn about instruments which can help them to improve their attention, self-knowledge and mental habits.
- b. Collectively.* On a team level, there should in most work contexts be set time aside for two types of meetings on a regular basis; one meeting with the purpose to follow up on the day-to-day operations and one meeting to reflect on the current state of work and what can be done better. A good example of this practice is the management team in the Danish broadband provider Fullrate whose management team decided early on as a start-up to have two weekly meetings – one tactical and one strategic. By separating these two meetings they ensured that the more reflective considerations did not get buried in all the

practical day-to-day issues. That is what happens in most companies where a hectic working reality quickly can overshadow the development of more long-term and innovative oriented thinking.

- 3. Rooms which are designed for immersive and reflective thoughts should be designated in the office space.** In a business environment where open offices has become the norm and where digital devices constantly give us some kind of interruption, it is becoming increasingly hard to focus our attention very deeply on one single issue for a longer period of time. One can of course book a meeting room for these types of situations, but these are, as the name implies, normally designed for meetings and not uninterrupted work. Managers should take the necessary action to secure that employees have access to rooms which facilitates innovative thoughts undistracted. These rooms can both be with or without digital devices present – the important thing here is, as previously mentioned, that the digital devices are used as an instrument for creativity and not as an instrument for distraction.

The rise of digital technologies has made our lives much more fast-paced and hectic than in the past, and this development will only continue to intensify in the future. This is not necessarily bad; in fact I would argue that it is on most accounts very beneficial. But if we in the future are to neutralize the more destructive side of these technologies and ensure that productivity and innovation gains are captured from new digital opportunities, business managers needs to take active strong leadership with regards to how these technologies are used in the business. The alternative is that the questions and answers which managers base their business decisions on will become reactive in nature and with an inherent focus on the short-term. In order to drive businesses and society forward in the digital age we need long-term thinking based on deep reflection and uninterrupted problem-solving.