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Five tips to focus at work

September 17, 2013



Alissa
[\[/author/alissadossantos\]](/author/alissadossantos)
Product Marketing
Manager

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When was the last time you were reading a draft and your phone buzzed? While writing your last email, were you distracted by an incoming email notification? How many times in the last week did a co-worker interrupt you mid-task? Be honest.

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Office workers are interrupted [or self-interrupt] every three minutes, according to a study [\[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324339204578173252223022388.html\]](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324339204578173252223022388.html) by Gloria Mark at the University of California, Irvine. To make matters worse, it can take up to 23 minutes for a worker to return to the original task. No wonder it's so hard to get work done. And while our ability to juggle work is necessary, multitasking is a weakness, not a strength. A 2009 study [\[http://business.time.com/2013/04/17/dont-multitask-your-brain-will-thank-you/\]](http://business.time.com/2013/04/17/dont-multitask-your-brain-will-thank-you/) at Stanford University found

that frequent multitaskers not only underperformed when compared to nonmultitaskers, they also used their brains less effectively when they focused on a single activity.



[<http://blog.hightail.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Unknown.jpeg>]

With some thoughtful self-discipline, there's no reason you can't buck the stats. Follow these five tips to be more focused at work.

1. Get in early

Arrive a little earlier than the pack. A quiet, uninterrupted office means you can get a few things done before your colleagues meander in with their Philz [<http://www.philzcoffee.com/>]. For a productive morning, research [<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201208/early-risers-are-happier-healthier-and-more-productive-night-owls>] shows you should make a to do list the night before, exercise and eat a proper [protein-rich] breakfast. Try to avoid morning meetings so you can do your most important, high-priority work at the beginning of the day, before distractions pick up.

2. Carve out UWT

Three words for you: uninterrupted work time. One of the best ways to really get stuff done is to block off UWT [pronounced "you-dubya-tee"] on your calendar. Researchers at Florida State University found [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/opinion/sunday/relax-youll-be-more-productive.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0] that the best performers work in 90-minute uninterrupted chunks. If 90 minutes is too long, try out the Pomodoro technique [<http://pomodorotechnique.com/>], which touts 25-minute work sessions followed by three to five-minute breaks. Blocking off big chunks of time for creative and strategic work is necessary if you're going to be a focused force in your office.

3. Batch distractions

Want to check Facebook? Respond to a personal email? Retweet your favorite celeb on Twitter (@mindykaling [https://twitter.com/mindykaling], if you were wondering)? In the incessant flow of texts, notifications, beeps and buzzes, it's easy to feel like you can't afford even a few minutes of personal time during the workday. You can – the trick is to batch the distractions into your breaks. As long as you're actually *working when you're working*, studies [http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/02/110208131529.htm] show breaks can help you improve productivity and creativity. So watch that clip of Kid President [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-gQLqv9f4o] ["Not cool, Robert Frost."], text your friend back about dinner, and then... get back to work.

4. Just say no

In an effort to be a team player, you can easily get roped into lower-priority meetings or side projects. But remember, top performers guard their time and energy so they can focus on their most important tasks. It isn't always easy to say no to a co-worker or boss, but sometimes it's necessary to *just say no* [I'm OK with this saying reminding you of this [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_Say_No]]. No one else will guard your time, so you've got to do it yourself. Next time a co-worker asks to "put some time on your calendar," ask yourself if you really need to meet for 30 minutes. You might be able to accomplish more with a quick email or chat at your desk. Your boss will thank you later for having a long-term perspective on your work.

5. Set a time limit

If you really want to sharpen your focus, pick a task and set a time limit. By forcing a deadline, you'll make decisions faster and not spend an unlimited amount of time on a single project. When you get distracted, you'll also know you only have X minutes to get your task completed, so you'll be less likely to cave to the distraction. Set a time limit [schedule it on your calendar, if that helps], find a gorgeous, empty conference room [http://static2.businessinsider.com/image/507eb9bf69bedd2a6300001b-1200/inside-the-former-paper-mill-is-a-gorgeous-conference-room-this-is-just-outside-of-a-sauna-where-employees-can-go-to-relax-when-ever-they-like.jpg], and get it done. In a jam, an ugly conference room [http://chronicle.com/img/photos/biz/photo_3890_wide_large.jpg] will do.

Remember, feeling good about work

[http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_what_makes_us_feel_good_about_our_work.html] is

about making constant progress and having a sense of purpose. You can't do that if you're distracted. Buckle down, focus, and soon you'll be a productivity machine.

Follow Alissa (<https://twitter.com/AlissaDosSantos>) on Twitter.

Comments

September 19, 2013
9:25 am



Aaron

I typically don't force-focus by task, since that can be too amorphous for my tastes. I do work off the 90/20 rule [<http://blogs.hbr.org/2011/01/the-most-important-practice-i/>], which I first saw in the HBR. Work for 90 minutes, rest for 20. And during my freelance years, I learned how powerful "no" can be.

Great list.



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