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MANAGING YOURSELF

Conquering Digital Distraction

Two experts on managing the overload
by Larry Rosen and Alexandra Samuel



Managing Yourself

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Two experts on managing the overload

DIGITAL OVERLOAD may be the defining problem of today's workplace. All day and night, on desktops, laptops, tablets, and smartphones, we're bombarded with so many messages and alerts that even when we want to focus, it's nearly impossible. And when we're tempted to procrastinate, diversions are only a click away.

This culture of constant connection takes a toll both professionally and personally. We waste time, attention, and energy on relatively unimportant information and interactions, staying busy but producing little of value. As the late Clifford Nass and his colleagues at Stanford University have shown, people who regularly juggle several streams of content do not pay attention, memorize, or manage their tasks as well as those who focus on one thing at a time. The result is reduced productivity and engagement, both in the office and at home. The Information Overload Research Group, a nonprofit consortium of business professionals, researchers, and consultants, reports that knowledge workers in the United States waste 25% of their time dealing with their huge and growing data streams, costing the economy \$997 billion annually.

Most people agree on the solution: Control the digital overload rather than letting it control you. But how, exactly, does one do that? We asked two experts: Larry Rosen, a psychologist, and Alexandra Samuel, a technologist. We suspected that their disparate backgrounds would lead them to offer dramatically different advice, and we were right. Rosen believes that we should systematically turn away from the information stream and focus on more energy-enhancing activities. Samuel argues that the best way to fight digital distraction is with the strategic use of digital tools. Taken together, their solutions offer a useful primer on how we can begin to tackle this huge and growing challenge.

Take a Break

BY LARRY ROSEN

Marco, a 38-year-old manager at an educational app company, used to start every day with his smartphone, checking it and replying to messages before getting out of bed. Over breakfast he read news on his CNN app, and even when driving to work, he couldn't resist looking at his phone. At the office he was so distracted by incoming e-mails and texts that he had trouble completing important tasks, and colleagues grumbled about his failure to engage in meetings. Evenings at home were spent on his phone or laptop instead of interacting with his wife and kids. Marco confessed all this to me after I spoke at his children's school, and then he asked if I could help him change his habits. I assured him that I could, and that he wasn't alone.

For the past few years, psychologists have been examining the recent dramatic changes in humans' relationship to technology. Consider a study that colleagues and I conducted in 2008 and replicated last year. We gave people in three age groups—Baby Boomers, Generation X, and the Net Generation (born in the

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1980s)—a list of 66 pairs of activities to find out which ones they typically did in tandem. Questions included, for example, “Do you go online and text simultaneously?” and “Do you e-mail and eat at the same time?” In 2008, Baby Boomers responded yes for 59% of the pairs, on average; the numbers were 67% for Gen Xers and 75% for the Net Gen. In 2014 the percentages were higher—67% for Baby Boomers, 70% for Gen X, and 81% for the Net Gen. Meanwhile, members of the iGeneration (born in the 1990s), whom we added to the second study, were engaging in an astonishing 87% of the paired activities, even when they found one in the pair difficult all by itself.

Unfortunately, the evidence shows that multitasking isn't always successful: Doing two things well at the same time is possible only when at least one task is automatic. So, yes, you can walk and chew gum simultaneously. But check e-mail while participating in a conference call? Look at your Facebook feed and still do meaningful work? Researchers have demonstrated that the mere presence of a phone makes people less productive

distractions? Some people refer to the overuse of digital devices as an addiction. But since most of us don't appear to gain much pleasure from the behavior—a defining feature of addiction—I wouldn't classify it as such. More accurate are terms such as FOMO (fear of missing out), FOBO (fear of being offline), and nomophobia (fear of being out of mobile phone contact)—all forms of anxiety that border on obsession or compulsion. People are constantly checking their laptops, tablets, and phones because they worry about receiving new information after everyone else, responding too slowly to a text or an e-mail, or being late to comment on or like a social media post.

Numerous studies support this diagnosis of the problem. In my lab we've found that many people, regardless of age, check their smartphones every 15 minutes or less and become anxious if they aren't allowed to do so. My colleague Nancy Cheever brought 163 students into a lecture hall, asked them to sit without talking, doing work, or using their phones, and then assessed their anxiety over the next hour. Although light

Use behavioral principles to wean yourself from your digital devices.

and less trusting, and that students who are interrupted while studying take longer to learn the material and feel more stressed. Gloria Mark, of the University of California, Irvine, has shown that workers typically attend to a task for about three minutes before switching to something else (usually an electronic communication) and that it takes about 20 minutes to return to the previous task.

Why are we allowing ourselves to be so debilitated by technological

smartphone users showed no change, moderate users experienced initial alarm that leveled off, and those accustomed to checking their phones all day long felt their anxiety spike immediately and continue to increase.

How do we calm the anxiety and thereby avoid the distraction? When I speak to students, parents, teachers, and business leaders, I recommend three strategies—all of which involve turning away from technology at times to regain focus.

First, use behavioral principles to wean yourself from your digital devices. Allow yourself to check all modes of e-communication, but then shut everything down and silence your phone. Set an alarm for 15 minutes, and when it rings give yourself one minute for a tech check-in. Repeat this process until you are comfortable increasing your off-grid time to an hour or several hours.

A second strategy is inspired by the research of Nathaniel Kleitman, who established that our brains work in 90-minute rest-activity cycles not only when we sleep but also when we're awake. So you should take a recharging break every hour and a half, especially if you're multitasking with technology, which makes the brain overly active. Even a 10-minute walk in nature is enough to have a calming effect. You might also listen to music, look at art, exercise, or meditate.

Finally, keep technology out of your bedroom. The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) and Mayo Clinic have noted that the use of blue-light-emitting LED devices is detrimental to your sleep—a critical period that cements what you learned during the day, while removing useless information and the toxic byproducts of daily neuronal activities. NSF recommends that you abstain from viewing digital material for one hour before bedtime, while Mayo Clinic suggests dimming screens used at night, keeping them 14 inches from your face, and removing them from the room when you're ready to sleep. The aim is to block the release of neurotransmitters that energize your brain and instead promote the production of melatonin, which allows you to rest.

I persuaded Marco to periodically disconnect and, when using technology, take recharging breaks. He started going for short walks outside his office and putting his phone in a kitchen

drawer at night. Within a month he was able to ignore his devices for half-hour intervals, and he felt happier and more energetic, as well as more attentive and productive.

Although we turn to technology to soothe our anxieties, overdosing on it just exacerbates them. To break the cycle, we must limit the use of our devices. Only then can we regain our ability to focus.

Fight Fire with Fire

BY ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

 **Alexandra Samuel** is an expert in online engagement and the author of *Work Smarter with Social Media* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2015). She previously led social media R&D for the customer intelligence leader Vision Critical (which has worked with some of the companies mentioned in this article).

Given all the ways that technology imposes demands on our time, we forget that digital tools are actually supposed to make our lives easier. And used correctly, they can. From my two decades researching how people use technology, I've learned that it's not only possible to fight fire with fire—it's essential.

"Turning off" is simply not a tenable solution in the digital age; with so much work, communication, and socializing taking place on screens, few of us can afford to be off-line for significant portions of the workday (or even evenings and weekends). A recent survey by Tata Communications showed that people

in the U.S., Europe, and Asia spend an average of more than five hours a day on the internet, and 64% worry when they don't have access.

Tiffany Sauder, the founder and president of Element Three, a branding and marketing agency, knows the challenge that always-on connectivity poses for an executive in a growing business. After enjoying breakout success in 2011 and landing a retainer arrangement with a large client, she was ready to create a stronger public identity for the company and herself. She knew she needed to start using Twitter, but developing a social media presence felt like a big job for someone who was already overwhelmed by the messages flying at her each day. "E-mail was a nightmare," she says. "It felt like I worked for my in-box and not for myself."

Technology wasn't Tiffany's problem; her use of it was. Like many executives I see, she wasn't exploiting tools designed to make online communications as focused and productive as possible.

The first step is to abandon the myth of "keeping up"—the belief that you will be able to process all your e-mails, read everything important in the media, and send thoughtful posts to your networks without fail. Instead your goals should be to sort and limit the information you receive and to streamline the work of reading, responding to, and sharing what matters.

For example, few e-mails need immediate attention, and some industry news simply isn't relevant to your job. It can be a challenge to restrict what comes into your in-box; most people I've advised are terrified they'll miss something. But once they start to filter out the noise and busywork, they find that they're more effective at communicating with clients and colleagues, staying informed about

their fields, and building their social profiles, all with relatively modest investments of time.

E-mail can be one of the biggest distractions. If you always have a backlog cluttering your in-box, or if you're so diligent about replying to messages that you can't seem to find time for the rest of your work, then automating at least part of the job offers huge benefits. Outlook, Gmail, and most other major e-mail tools will allow you to set rules and filters to ensure that only the most essential messages reach you right away. You can direct less urgent messages into other folders automatically and review those later.

The kinds of e-mails you probably don't need to see immediately include newsletters, purchase receipts, internal company notices, social media alerts, messages on which you are only copied, and even meeting requests (if they show up in your calendar and can be reviewed there instead). Remember that these messages aren't disappearing—they're in folders waiting to be read at your convenience. Designate an hour for that every day or week, depending on the content.

Filtering your e-mail will make it easier and faster to triage and review the messages that do make it to your in-box. And if you're worried that an important message will fall through the cracks, you can always periodically skim through everything you've received (select "All Mail" in Gmail, or search your mail for the letter "a" to bring up a comprehensive display).

When it comes to news consumption, automation offers the same rewards. Most of us tune in to a wide range of outlets, thought leaders, and conversations, but if you're hunting all over the internet or scanning lots of social media posts or articles you shouldn't bother with, you're wasting

time. Instead, make the most relevant information come to you by using a newsreader app such as feedly (my top recommendation, because it works on both computers and mobile devices), Flipboard, or Reeder. You can follow or subscribe to your favorite news sources, blogs, and topic discussions to collect the most pertinent items all in one place. Then set aside specific times—once a day, or even just a few times a week—to read them.

You'll get the biggest gains from this approach if you're very specific about the kinds of articles that come your way. To set up a custom article

Automation tools can significantly streamline the process of deciding what gets your attention.

feed, for example, experiment with different combinations of keywords, hashtags, and operators in a search engine (such as "productivity AND #automation") and then turn your results into one or more RSS (really simple syndication) feeds. Not every search service offers RSS feeds, and some make them a little hard to find, but once you have URLs for the ones you've created, you can copy them into your newsreader app.

Remember that you can't and don't need to read *everything*; you're looking for significant stories and insights in your field, plus a little extra content that gives you something new to think about—and something unique to share.

What about your digital output? Liking, favoriting, and tweeting help to build your professional credibility and spark new relationships, but maintaining that online presence

takes a lot of time. That's why I advise overloaded executives to automate at least some of the work.

One easy way is with the newsreader you've set up. Most of these applications offer one-click options for posting to Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook. But it's even more efficient to use a tool like Hootsuite, Buffer, or Social Inbox, all of which let you reach multiple networks from one place and schedule posts in advance. Once you've set up a system like this, you can create a week's worth of updates in less than an hour. While reading through the stories in your newsreader, simply put worthwhile items into your queue to go out, adding commentary as needed. This natural, low-effort extension of your reading ensures that you have a reliable daily presence on social media even when you don't have time to look for the latest shareable links.

Today Tiffany is reaping the benefits of automation. She relies on Gmail filters to separate marketing newsletters and social media notifications from must-see items, so when she checks her e-mail during the day, she can focus on the messages that matter most. She sets aside a couple of periods each week to catch up on the others, and she uses Social Inbox to send out posts based on what she finds in industry newsletters. She's no longer working for her in-box; she's reclaimed evening hours for herself; and Element Three is thriving.

Automation can't eliminate digital distraction, but it can help you fight the battle. E-mail filters, newsreaders, post schedulers, and other tools can significantly streamline the process of deciding what gets your attention. That will help you feel less overwhelmed and better able to focus on your most important tasks, at work or at home, online or off. ♥

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