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SHIFTING CAREERS

Fighting a War Against Distraction

The subject of focus comes up a lot in my discussions with people about work. We talk about the constant interruptions of working in the digital age, of the mistakes we make while multitasking and the efforts to find quiet places to think.

Maggie Jackson has been paying attention to these questions for quite some time, and the result is a thoughtful new book, “Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age” (Prometheus).

The book promises to help us understand how we all became so distracted and how we can arrive at what she calls a “renaissance of attention.” I asked Ms. Jackson to write about this important issue for my blog. Following is what she said. MARCI ALBOHER

DISTRACTED? And how. Beeped and pinged, interrupted and inundated, overloaded and hurried — that’s how we live today. We prize knowledge work — work that relies on our intellectual abilities — and yet increasingly feel that we have no time to think. For all our connectivity, we often catch little more than snippets and glimpses of one another.

The greatest casualty of our mobile, high-tech age is attention. By fragmenting and diffusing our powers of attention, we are undermining our capacity to thrive in a complex, ever-shifting world. Consider the mounting costs of this widespread distraction:

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The average knowledge worker switches tasks every three minutes, and, once distracted, a worker takes nearly a half-hour to resume the original task, according to Gloria Mark, a leader in the new field of “interruption science.”

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Interruptions and the requisite recovery time now consume 28 percent of a worker’s day, the business research firm Basex estimates. The risks are clear. As one top executive told me, “Knowledge work can’t be done in sound bites.”

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Employees who are routinely interrupted and lack time to focus are more apt to feel frustrated, pressured and stressed, according to separate studies by Ms. Mark and the Families and Work Institute, a nonprofit group.

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Under deadline pressure, workers produce creative work on days when they are focused, not when they are scattered and interrupted, a study published in the Harvard Business Review found.

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In meetings where everyone is checking e-mail, opportunities for collective creative energy and critical thinking are lost, argues Nathan Zeldes, a senior engineer at [Intel](#) and a leader of the nonprofit Information Overload Research Group. At home as well, split-focus gives a clear message: “You aren’t worth my time.”

Should we blame the BlackBerry and other devices? No. The P.D.A., the cellphone and the computer did not usher in our hypermobile, split-focus, cybercentric culture. Instead, the first high-tech revolutions more than a century ago created new experiences of time and space that have intensified. Inventions like the telegraph, cinema, railroad and airplane shattered distance and upended ancient temporal rhythms. Our age of speed and overload has been building for generations.

But just as we are working toward a green earth, so we can find ways to create what I like to call “planet focus.” What’s needed is a renaissance of attention — a revaluing and cultivating of the art of attention, to help us achieve depth of thought and relations in this complex, high-tech time.

The first step is to learn to speak a language of attention. The exciting news is that the enigma of attention has just begun to be mapped, tracked and decoded by neuroscientists who now consider

attention to be a trio of skills: focus, awareness and so-called executive attention. Think of it this way: You can be “aware” that you’re in a beautiful garden and then you can “focus” on an individual flower. The last piece, “executive attention,” is the ability to plan and make decisions. Learning about the nature and mechanisms of attention has been life-changing for me. Sometimes I hopscotch distractedly through the Net. It’s fun. But now, if I’m wrestling with a problem or really want to connect with someone, I turn off the ringers, collect my racing mind and find the time and space to focus.

We are born interruption-driven — that’s how humans stay tuned to their environment. But if we jump on every e-mail message or ping, we’ll have trouble pursuing our long-term goals. To make inroads on the deep, messy work of life, we need to stay focused, bringing the spotlight of our attention back again and again to the work at hand.

Practice may help. Scientists are discovering that attention can be bolstered through training, including meditation. One study, for instance, showed that eight weeks of meditation significantly boosted focus in a group of 17 novices. Six-year-olds given computer-based attention training by the scientist Michael Posner showed a marked gain in executive attention.

TO combat overload, we also need to look to our environments. That’s why a few pioneering companies are creating places or times for uninterrupted, focused creative thought. [I.B.M.](#) employees practice “Think Fridays” worldwide, avoiding or cutting back on e-mail, meetings and interruptions. Other firms are setting aside unwired, quiet rooms.

“Wisdom is the art of knowing what to overlook,” wrote William James, the father of American psychology research. Long ago, he identified the foremost challenge of our time: how to allocate our attention. And now, we’re beginning to discover what he foretold: that living distracted just isn’t smart.

Shifting Careers, a blog by Marci Alboher, is at nytimes.com/shiftingcareers.

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