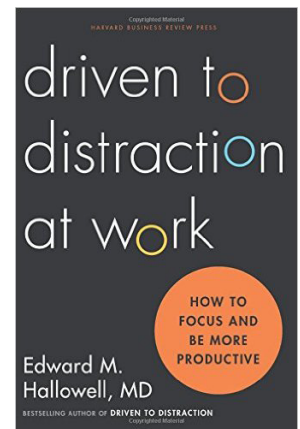


Driven to Distraction at Work:

How to Focus and Be More Productive

A book excerpt by Edward M. Hallowell



Attention Deficit Trait – The Growing Workplace Problem

You know the problem – swarms of distractions, constant interruptions, various tones chiming all around, rampant “screen sucking,” texting under the table during meetings, the overloading of mental circuits, and frequent feelings of frustration at trying to get everything done well and on time. This is the modern context in which most of us work. Whether the workplace itself or the numerous demands on your time drive you to distraction, the end result is the same. You can’t focus on anything anymore at work, and it’s taking its toll on your performance and your sense of well-being.

Capturing a widespread desperation, Ann Crittenden, in her *New York Times* review of Brigid Schulte’s sobering 2014 book, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*, allowed that Schulte’s sensible solutions were “good suggestions,” but then punctuated her review with grim resignation: “But like all self-help advice, they don’t measure up against the entrenched forces that are indifferent if not hostile to the emotional well-being of a majority of Americans. Schulte is fighting SEAL Team Six with a pair of fingernail scissors.”

This book offers a different view. While I fully agree that we are contending with forces never seen before – and that the modern workplace presents distractions like never before – I also know that any person can learn

to modulate distraction and overload well enough to take greater control, while becoming happier, healthier, and more productive in the process. To be sure, as Crittenden, Schulte, and numerous other commentators have shown in well-documented detail, the special forces that oppose a sane and measured life today advance en masse like invisible pincers, nipping at us wherever we turn. And this isn’t going to let up. If anything, the number of distractions will continue to grow, exponentially. This is why all the commonly offered advice – such as manage your time and to-do lists more efficiently, multitask better,

be more organized – don’t and can’t work. They’re only Band-Aids. Instead, you have to retrain your attention. You have to recognize that the underlying issues of mental distraction – all of which are magnified and even harder to control in the workplace – are within your control. Even if you can’t control your environment, you can learn

how to reach a more productive mental state of focus, relying on planning, preparation, and technique instead of the frantic efforts people typically use to control their time and attention.

I’m a focus doctor. An MD, now sixty-four years old as I write these words, I’ve studied attention and productivity for my entire career. “Attention deficit trait,” or ADT, is

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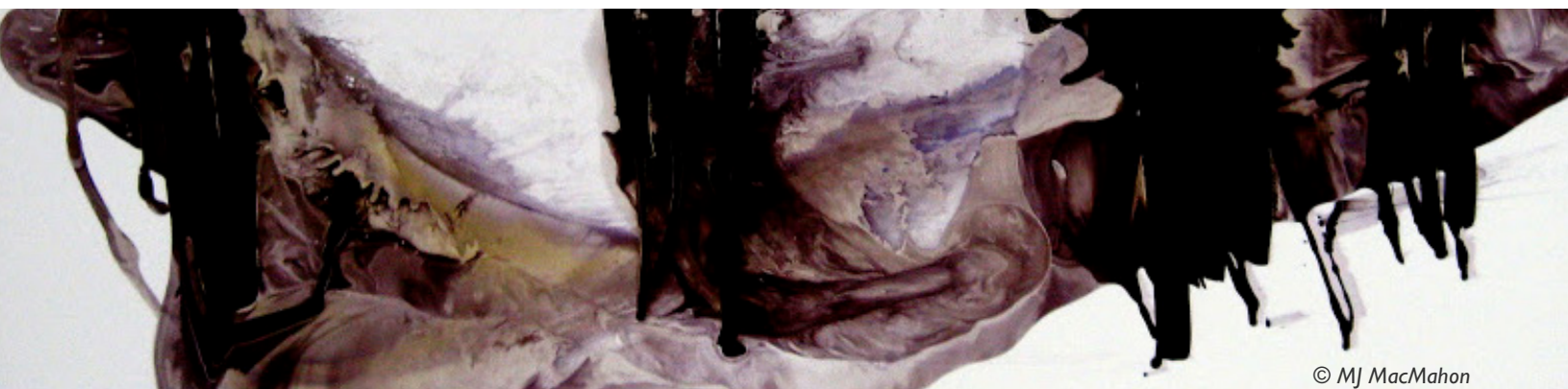
a term I coined in 1994 to describe what I observed at that time to be an increasingly common problem in the modern workplace.

Fate gave me a catbird seat from which to observe the growing epidemic of ADT that we are experiencing today. I've witnessed the vaporization of attention, as if it were boiling away, while people tried valiantly to keep track of more data than even the most adept human brain could possibly accommodate. Since modern life induces ADT, you may wake up in the morning without it, but by 10 a.m. have developed many of the symptoms, which include the following:

- A heightened distractibility and a persistent feeling of being rushed or in a hurry, even when there's no need to be, combined with a mounting feeling of how superficial your life has become: lots to do, but no depth of thought or feeling.
- An inability to sustain lengthy and full attention to a thought, a conversation, an image, a paragraph, a diagram, a sunset – or anything else, even when you try to.
- A growing tendency toward impatience, boredom, dissatisfaction, restlessness, irritability, frustration, or frenzy, sometimes approaching panic.
- A tendency to hop from task to task, idea to idea, even place to place.
- A tendency to make decisions impulsively, rather than reflecting and taking time to think them through.
- An increasing tendency to avoid thinking altogether, as if it were a luxury you don't have time for.
- A tendency to put off difficult work or conversations, coupled with a tendency to overfill your day with feckless busywork.
- A tendency to feel overwhelmed, even when, in reality, you're not.
- Haunting feelings of guilt about incomplete tasks, coupled with resentment that the tasks were imposed in the first place.
- Difficulty in fully enjoying pleasant moments and genuine achievements.
- Too often saying to yourself, "I'm working really hard but I'm not getting to where I want to be," both at work and in relationships.
- A feeling of loss of control over your own life and a nagging feeling of "What am I missing?"
- A recurring thought that "Someday I will make time for what really matters, but I don't have time to do that today."
- A growing, compulsive need for frequent electronic "hits," for example, checking e-mails, speaking on your iPhone, sending or receiving texts, Googling random subjects, visiting favorite web-sites, or playing games, coupled with almost an addict's yen for them when they are unavailable.
- A tendency to overcommit, make yourself too available, allow too many interruptions, and say yes too quickly.

If you see yourself in many or all of these feelings and tendencies, welcome to modern life. ADT is everywhere, especially at work.

Consider some of the pernicious effects of ADT. It leads you to respond to others in ways you otherwise wouldn't. How often do you find yourself tuning out when someone – say, a colleague or a friend – tells a long, albeit amusing, anecdote or who poignantly pours his or her heart out, while you fake full attention? Sometimes you might hear yourself responding rudely to a person



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who is trying to explain an important matter to you. How often do you find yourself just saying “Bottom line it” or “Give me the elevator pitch”?

Hyper-speed makes it impossible for you to absorb what’s new or different. So instead of finding new material to help you think in unexpected ways, you start thinking in bite-sized, convenient, mundane chunks made up of what’s familiar: the stereotypes, slogans, and buzzwords that trigger stock responses and come to define your predictable, prefabricated beliefs, understandings, and convictions.

Prescription For Focus

Although I never planned to when I was in medical school or residency, over the past thirty-plus years, I’ve turned focus and attention into my specialty, a specialty that didn’t exist when I was in training, but is booming now. If you search for the word “focus” on Amazon.com, you will get 463,374 titles, including Daniel Goleman’s 2013 book, *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*. While this book gives an excellent account of why focus is important to achieving goals, it doesn’t look at the many ways people lose their ability to focus at work or provide practical solutions for training the attention and regaining control at work.

Most people don’t see lack of focus as the root of their problem or even as a possibility. Most of those who consult me simply blame themselves for their failure to be happier or more successful. They don’t make excuses or blame the system or a difficult boss. “Maybe I’m just a born underachiever,” they conclude, or “Maybe I just don’t have what it takes to get where I want to get to.” They are worried about their jobs, their relationships, and their families, but they only blame themselves in response to the problems they face.

People are usually in more pain than they let on. If they even recognize how much their problem relates to impaired focus, they deal with it simply by trying to overpower it. But that’s like trying to cure nearsightedness by squinting harder. Ironically, the harder they try, the more likely they are to fail, which leads them to blame themselves even more, thus intensifying the problem. They don’t need to work harder, just smarter.

This book will teach you to work smarter, not harder. First, by recognizing and dealing with the six most common distractions or patterns of ADT at work,

and second, by learning a new set of techniques for managing your attention over time, you’ll be equipped to overcome whatever distraction is holding you back from doing your best work.

What is flexible focus?

Focus varies in its intensity and duration. At one extreme is the absence of focus (without being asleep, drunk, in a coma, or deprived of focus by some other physical cause). I call this aimless, meandering state “drift.” It can be a sweet state, indeed, or a time waster. Your mind simply drifts along, like a fisherman trawling. Sometimes, in drift, you catch a big fish.

You don’t know it, but your brain uses these seemingly empty moments to do a lot of work. It goes into what’s called “default mode,” activating the default network, or DN. Particularly active in these moments of daydreaming or drift are the lateral prefrontal cortex and the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, both of which are crucial in so-called executive function, which includes planning and focusing attention.

This explains, in part, why you need to look away from what you’re doing from time to time, to drift, to take a break mentally. Your brain does not take a break during these periods. Quite the opposite. It stokes up on energy, element number one in the basic plan, equipping you for the next period of paying close attention.

You might think the brain would consume more energy when working on a problem or concentrating on a task, but it doesn’t. When in drift, the DN consumes just as much, if not more, energy than when deeply in focus mode. Interestingly, in drift or in DN, what you think about (since your brain never goes empty) is usually other people, yourself, and the relationships among those. You engage in “social cognition.” Nature wired us to think socially during its down times. As psychologist Matthew Lieberman, a pioneer in social neuroscience, put it, “There are so many other things our brain could have been wired to spend its spare time on – learning calculus, improving our logical reasoning ability, cataloging variations in the classes of objects we have seen. Any of these could have adaptive value. But nature placed its bet on our thinking socially.”¹

At the other extreme of drift is “flow.” The

psychologist who researched this heightened state of awareness, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, named this most focused state of mind in 1975.² In flow, a person becomes so immersed in what he is doing that he loses self-consciousness altogether. He gets so into what he is doing that he merges with the action he is involved in, becoming one with it. He loses his sense of time, even his awareness of his biological needs and drives, a state reminiscent of William Butler Yeats's lines: "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?"³

Like all moments of peak intensity, flow fades. Almost all of us have entered into flow at one time or another, so we know firsthand that it doesn't last. Some people find flow while running or doing yoga; others while playing music, meditating, knitting, doing crossword puzzles; others while risking their lives skiing downhill or sweating over a piece of sculpture.

According to Csikszentmihalyi's research, corroborated by many people I've interviewed as well as my own experience, in flow a person experiences life at its peak, its most joyful, its most intensely fulfilling. It is also the state in which people exceed their personal best, often achieving much better work than they've ever done before. So absorbing, however, is the flow state that you only recollect the high of it, the pure joy of it. Since you lose self-consciousness when you're in flow, you're not aware of how great it is until it's over.

But you can't spend your whole day in flow. You need to eat and sleep. Furthermore, the brain in that state is limited by its supply of neurotransmitters. With practice, however, you can learn to enter flow regularly. The key is to engage in some activity that both matters to you deeply and is challenging, so that you have to stretch.

Csikszentmihalyi's work has been extended in practical directions by Steven Kotler, director of research for the Flow Genome Project, an international, transdisciplinary organization dedicated to decoding what happens during flow.⁴ Kotler and his group are developing methods for "hacking flow," as he puts it, as it occurs in everyday

life.⁵ Most of his research has been with athletes who do extreme sports that often put their lives in danger. He's found that these athletes access flow regularly and that when they do, they routinely exceed their personal best. In these cases, great gain comes with great risk.

But it is a safe assumption that most people do not want to put their lives in danger in order to access flow. For us – and I certainly include myself in this group – the doorway to flow still remains open. We need to select those activities that both challenge us and matter deeply to us.

For example, in my case, this challenge comes with writing. I have a love-hate relationship with writing; most writers do. That's because writing is beyond challenging; at times, it seems impossible. The writing is almost never as good as it could be or as the writer hopes it will be, so the task promises disappointment at every turn. That's why we writers often avoid writing. When Ernest Hemingway was asked how to write a novel, he replied,

"The first thing you do is clean out the refrigerator." He meant that writers will do just about anything to avoid putting words onto a page.

Yet, we love what we do too. Few things please me more than creating a well-turned sentence or describing an image that does its job succinctly. (I hope you find a few in this book.) They are my reasons for coming back to the blank page, just as the great shot is the golfer's reason for coming back to the tee, in spite of all his bad shots. When I finally do sit down at the keyboard, I typically enter flow – usually for minutes, but sometimes for an hour. The difference between my experience with writing and that of, say, the extreme skier is that I do not have the element of danger to keep me riveted in flow for extended periods. As a result, flow comes and goes as I write. (I suppose if I were writing with my life on the line, I might remain in flow for a longer time.)

Short of flow, there is focus. We all know what focus is. It is the standard term for a concentrated, clear state of mind, focused on one target. Between focus and flow lies what I call "flexible focus." It differs from flow in that it's not the high that flow is; it's a way of tapping into

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ACHIEVE FOCUS THREE WORDS AT A TIME

- 1 Turn it off (TIO).** Turn off your electronic devices during periods of the day when you want uninterrupted, focused time.
- 2 Trust your way.** Perhaps the single-most clichéd song lyric ever, “I did it my way” became so clichéd because its message is so powerful. We focus best and do our best when we do it our way. We all have our routines, our own individualized process or way for producing our best work. Trust yours. When you don’t know where you’re headed, your process or way will allow your unconscious to enter. It will guide and often surprise you with your most valuable discoveries and unexpected solutions. Don’t work against your grain, but with it.
- 3 Take a break.** When you start to glaze over or feel frantic, stop what you are doing. Stand up, walk around, get a glass of water, stretch. Just sixty seconds can do the trick.
- 4 Do something difficult.** People focus most intently when they take on a challenge, when they are working in an area where they are skilled, but where they are also stretched. Often, amazingly enough, what seemed impossible becomes possible.
- 5 Ask for help.** Don’t feel it is a sign of weakness to ask for help when you hit a snag. It’s just the opposite, a sign of strength that can get you out of a confused place and back on track.
- 6 Take your time.** One of the truest rules of modern life is if you don’t take your time, someone or something else will take it from you. Guard your time jealously. It is your most prized possession. Do not give it away easily or let someone regulate it for you, unless you absolutely have to do so.
- 7 Close your eyes.** When you are losing focus or feeling confused, the simple act of sitting back in your chair and closing your eyes can, oddly enough, allow you to see clearly. It can restore focus and provide a new direction.
- 8 Draw a picture.** Visuals clarify thinking. Draw a diagram, construct a table, cover a page with zigzags like a child finger painting, cover a page with phrases and arrows, use colored pencils or markers. Draw on poster paper on an easel or on the floor, just get past words and blow up the frame to accommodate visuals of all kinds. You may soon see the bigger picture you’d been looking for coming into focus.
- 9 Talk to yourself.** Talking aloud to yourself can lead you out of confusion. Assuming you are in a setting that allows for this, simply talk about the issue you are grappling with. Talking out loud engages a different part of the brain than thinking in silence. It can clear out the fog.
- 10 Do what works.** Don’t worry about convention or what’s supposed to work. Some people focus better with music playing or in a noisy room. Some people focus better when walking or even running. Some people focus best in early morning, others late at night; some in cold rooms, others in a sauna; some while fasting, others while eating. There is no right way, only the best way for you. Experiment and discover what works for you.



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some of the qualities of flow without being so absorbed that you can't attend to anything else. In a state of flexible focus, you retain the ability to concentrate on a task, while at the same time remaining open to new input.

Flexible focus is a hybrid of flow that's accessible in everyday life. When in a state of flexible focus, you have a semipermeable boundary around your mind that allows for some distraction and sometimes the arrival of a new and important idea. For example, consider the case of David Neeleman, the founder of JetBlue. Neeleman invented the electronic ticket, one of the most important innovations in the business of aviation in the past twenty years. "I didn't plan to do it," he told me. "I just saw the idea one day. It seemed so obvious. I didn't understand why someone else hadn't already thought of it. But, in fact, everyone else in the business laughed at me, saying, 'No one will go to the airport without a paper ticket.' Of course, now we all do, and it's saved the industry many millions and saved customers all kinds of anxiety and missed flights."

"What led to the idea?" I asked.

"Nothing," Neeleman said. "Other than that I'm always thinking of ways to improve the business. That's really all I do. Come up with ideas and develop them. The electronic ticket was just one of my better ones. But the process is the same with all of them. I get into a certain mode and ideas come."

Neeleman is not an artist; he's a businessman. But in thinking up the electronic ticket, his mind was in a state of open-minded readiness. He was pondering ways to improve efficiency, as most executives do. But instead of forcing an idea up from a rigid, established, well-trodden place – say, overvaluing or being invested in his own past experience or reading everything he could about improving efficiency – he put himself into a state of flexible focus, and the idea appeared.

Flexible focus embodies a paradox. In flexible focus, you hold on to and balance both the logical and creative

parts of your brain at the same time. You combine both your creative powers with your powers to organize and analyze. You're able to take in new input without becoming sidetracked by it. You're able to stay on task but not rigidly so.

To achieve flexible focus, you instinctively balance right brain with left brain, creativity with discipline, randomness with organization. You can be searching while sticking with what you're doing, combining flexibility with rigor, spontaneity with structure, rule breaking with rule adherence. You can mix a new way with a proven way, and a journey with a goal. This is the great cerebral balancing act, the major skill, that allows you to master the challenges of your work and to take advantage of the opportunities with which modern life abounds. In achieving such a balance, you gain access to unbidden, unexpected thoughts, images, impulses, and emotions that can deepen any mental activity, while you retain the ability to organize and develop the ideas you already have. ■



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