

Why Do We Find It So Hard to Focus?

“It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.”

Edmund Hillary

We’ve all had our struggles during Covid. We’ve had to cope with extended remote working, home schooling, limited workspace, illness or death of family members or friends, isolation through quarantine, and for many people, even redundancy. It’s been relentless.

Despite the fact that the world has opened up again, we are still coming to grips with hybrid working, with routines and “anchor days” being tried and tested. A recent HBR study found that 80% of people feel overwhelmed and time poor, have too much to do and so little time to do it in.

A big challenge for many employees, is the level of distraction and daily interruptions that disrupt our ability to focus. How can we get good work done?

Deirdre Murray, Executive Coach with PEOPLE RESOURCES, offers 7 top tips to help you get the best from your brain and regain a sense of control in this post-Covid world.



Is this you?

You spend too much time in online meetings. Work endless unscheduled hours. Don't like saying 'no' without feeling guilty. You feel you're not getting any time to think and plan for the future. You never get things quite finished because of so many interruptions. The email or i-message "ping!" never stops or you feel you lack focus completely!

Even though deliberate focus has always been an issue for many people, the pandemic has really challenged our ability. A recent study by Gloria Mark at the University of California found that five years ago we were switching tasks every 3 minutes – now it's every 40 seconds! Jennifer Senior, Columnist with the New York Times, identified that working remotely during the Covid pandemic had created an unending series of staccato pulses of

two-minute activities that many were struggling to manage. Her research found that collaborative demands on employees have increased by 50% over the last decade and that employees were spending 85% of their week in collaborative processes with little focus time to concentrate on individual tasks.

A study by Atlassian in 2021 indicated that in virtual world of meetings, 91% of participants were daydreaming, (studies show 49% of our day is spent daydreaming anyway), 39% had slept during a meeting, 73% did other work, 43% were overwhelmed by the actual number of meetings and 47% said they were the biggest time waster. Shopify, has recently installed 'meeting free Wednesdays' and has cancelled all meetings with more than 2 employees for a trial period and wants leaders to think carefully about rescheduling them back, just to let staff concentrate on more focused work.

We're also overloaded with excessive emails, which we check 36 times per hour. (Atlassian 2021). Unfortunately, for every interruption it takes us on average, 23 mins to refocus. That's up to 13 weeks a year, simply in task switching. It is a myth that we multitask well. The brain can only focus on one thing at one time. When we compensate and do several things we just "task switch" and we lose cognitive focus and this can lead to serious errors. A recent study of drivers showed that those who text while driving are six times more likely to have an accident. Studies show that only 2.5% of the population are super multi-taskers. (Watson & Strayer, 2010)

According to Mark Robert Waldman, Neuroscience Researcher, the brain is constantly flooded with massive amounts of information and yet we can focus on what's important and what to tune out. Researchers have pinpointed a circuit in the brain that suppresses sensory distractions and irrelevant inputs. Focused cognition in the brain can consume a lot of energy and can be quite tiring so the only way to allow for focus is by eliminating distractions – a function known as "efficient selection."

There are 3 types of attention:

1. **Selective attention** which focuses on one thing and disregards others
2. **Divided attention** also known as "attention switching" where we toggle back and forth continuously as in driving a car, and lastly,
3. **Sustained attention**, where we focus on something for a longer period and tune up or tune out other sensory inputs. For example, when searching for directions while driving in an unfamiliar area, you probably find you have to turn the volume down in the car or ask the kids to quieten down so you can really concentrate.

In order to develop a good, focused routine, **here are 7 practical tips** to help you regain your focus and get the best from your brain:

1. Mind your energy not your time.

As Tony Schwartz tells us, time is a finite resource. Sometimes we forget that we only have one battery and it needs to be recharged. We would wreck our cars if we didn't refuel in time, as dirt would get into the carburetor. Rising

demands in the workplace can make us work longer hours, which can take its toll on us physically, mentally, and emotionally, so we need to watch out for burnout. For example, if you have a hectic day of meetings, be mindful to have a lighter administrative day the following day to balance your energy. Recognise what works for you and adopt good habits and rituals that re-fuel your energy.

2. **Decide to focus:**

The brain works best with 'chunking.' Carve out an optimum time of 55 mins interspersed with 15 mins routine work. (For students, a chunked study period called the "pomodoro" technique is often recommended – 20 mins study with 5 mins recall, as recall really helps cement learning in the brain.) Sometimes we can get sucked into an email trail that can take up all morning and we wonder why our day has been so unproductive. The brain works best with focus on one thing at one time.

Dr John Arden, neuroscientist, provides a very good analogy of **FEED**:

- a. Decide to FOCUS
- b. Make an EFFORT
- c. It becomes EFFORTLESS
- d. DETERMINED to keep going

3. **Eat those frogs! Focus on the few not the many.**

As Brian Tracy states – what are your 3 fat frogs that add value and would make the biggest impact? The key is not to schedule your priorities but to prioritise your priorities. It's the 80/20 pareto principle. Twenty percent of focused effort creates 80% of value.

4. **Do your focused cognitive work in the morning** if possible when the brain is refreshed after a good night's sleep. Conduct meetings in the afternoon as the energy of the team will reinvigorate you through interaction.

5. **Delegate well.**

Delegate **as early as possible** in a planned and focused way. I always say to managers, delegate for growth not just merely delegate. What task, project work or assignment could I delegate that would really help that person develop and grow? Remember, 74% of learning is on the job itself so it's important that we delegate effectively.

Provide a **clear briefing and expectations and agree milestones and deadlines**. Over-zealous timeframes can cause unnecessary stress and pressure. It must be realistic and achievable even though it might be a bit of a stretch. Challenge and difficulty help us develop and build resilience.

Agree the **latest time** the assignment is due and provide accountability for the whole job not just half of it. As Dan Pink reminds us, people want **autonomy, mastery and purpose** in what they are doing. It is thankless if 3 people are responsible and it's no-one's clear responsibility.

And lastly and most importantly, **hands off!** No-one wants a micro-manager.

6. Mind your boundaries. Say “no” when necessary.

We all like to be helpful but sometimes we have to watch for the ‘monkeys’ coming in and recognise them. Practice saying ‘no’ with a ‘yes’ – acknowledge that it’s important but have a good valid reason for declining a task or request. Pause and reflect before you immediately say ‘yes’ to everything in attempting to be helpful. If you don’t set your own boundaries you’ll end up working with someone else’s.

7. Celebrate your good work.

Take time to acknowledge your focused work and give yourself a mini reward – take time out for a quick walk or cup of coffee. Reflect and acknowledge the good work done!

Ask yourself- What is the one thing that if you did it consistently over time would have a significantly positive effect on your work and life?

About the author

Deirdre Murray, Founder and Director of PEOPLE RESOURCES, partners as an Executive Coach, Trainer and Facilitator with leading multinationals and public sector bodies across all sectors. She works with leaders and teams to maximise their potential through focused and timely coaching and leadership development.

Deirdre is co-author of “Emotional Intelligence (EQ) – A Leadership Imperative!” Her second book “Communicate with Impact - Communicate and Influence Successfully,” is out now at www.peoplresources.ie. She is a regular motivational speaker at conferences, seminars and on radio broadcasts and provides journal entries for leading business magazines.

TINY HABITS LEAD TO *BIG* CHANGES