



PREPARED BY



# Information Overload

## Managing Distractions in the 21st Century

Paul J. Unger, Esq.

150 emails, ... 50 instant messages, ... 20 telephone calls, ... 15 walk-in interruptions, ... 25 social media notifications, ... 50 email or internet curiosity breaks, ... that totals 310 digital interruptions. Divide that into 480 workday minutes and that is an interruption every 1.55 minutes! Most studies that I see indicate that the average American worker is interrupted every 2-3 minutes. Now let's look specifically at just internal interruptions ... In 2015, the average American worker checks Facebook 21 times per day, takes 74 email curiosity breaks, and switches tasks on a computer 564 times a day! With these numbers of external and internal interruptions, it is incredible that we get any deep level project work accomplished.

In a 2007 Microsoft Corp. study, researchers concluded that it takes 15 minutes to return back to the work that computer programmers were performing at the time of an electronic-based interruption. If we get interrupted every 2-3 minutes, and it takes 15 minutes to return back to the work we were performing, how do we get anything done during the course of the day? This is why we look at our timesheets someday at 5 pm and see only 2 hours of billable time, but we feel like we put in a 14-hour day.

The reality is that we live in an age of information overload. We are constantly connected to the world and inundated with information. We sleep with our smartphones ... we are surrounded by 24-hour news networks ... social media ... tablet computers ... we can't escape. This is why very smart people underperform. Do you ever wonder why your head is in a constant cloud and you are unable to focus? It is called **Attention Deficit Trait (ADT)** and it is becoming a world-wide epidemic.

**ADT** is a **relative** to Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), but it is very different in that ADD has a genetic component. ADT does not. **ADT is environmentally induced, and in today's age of information overload, those environmental factors are technology-based. In other words, ADT is a condition that is in large part caused by the technology and connectivity that we love so much.** Yes, the very technology that we love so much is causing us to walk around with foggy brains and causing us to underperform. The scary part is that no one knows the long term effects of information overload. However, some shorter term

studies suggest that the problem is getting worse. More recent studies show that it takes slightly over 23 minutes to return back to the work we were performing at the time of a digital interruption.

What can we do about it? We need to rethink and realign the way that we live with technology. Listen, I love technology. It is my life and passion, but I sometimes don't like it so much, especially when it has a negative impact on productivity and my personal life. We combat ADT and overcome our inability to focus by attacking ADT on four fronts:

1. Personal Health
2. Workplace Health
3. Learning a Time, Task & Email Methodology
4. Learning Attention & Distraction Management Skills

**Personal Health is important on two fronts – Physical and Mental.**

Physically, we know that when we are fit, well-rested and healthy, we feel like we can conquer anything. When we overeat, and when we are sleep-deprived, every situation sometimes seems to be doomed for failure. As an example, we know that we cannot eat a foot-long sub full of meat and processed bread, a bag of chips and piece of pie for lunch and come back and expect to stay awake or concentrate. From a mental health perspective, we also know how difficult it is to concentrate and be productive when we are depressed, or when we are focusing on a personal relationship that is suffering. We can't ignore these two important areas of our personal life. If these areas need improvement, hire a personal trainer and start exercising, and go see a therapist or life coach to help get your physical and mental health back on track.

**Workplace or Organizational Health is also very important.**

We know how difficult it is sometimes to focus in an environment that is negative or unhealthy. We know how difficult it is to operate in an environment full of drama and distrust. We need to focus on ways to improve workplace health. I am not a subject matter expert on this, but a great starting point that I recommend would be two books – Five Dysfunctions of a Team and The Advantage, both by Patrick Lencioni.

**Learning a Time, Task and Email Management Methodology is the third front that we need to address.**

We need an effective way to (1) process the hundreds of digital and human interruptions/tasks that we receive during the course of a day, and (2) organize the tasks, digital information, and paper information that hits our desk. In other words, we need a digital methodology to get organized ... and stay organized. If we don't have system in place, we will operate in state of chaos. Studies show that if we do not have an effective task management system to capture our tasks and file away that information, we continue to worry about those things, which has an enormous impact on our ability to focus. I am an advocate of using and customizing tools like Microsoft Outlook and our smartphones to process this information. For those of you in the legal profession, I also think that legal document management systems can be extremely helpful to legal professionals. These are tools like Worldox, NetDocuments, iManage or OpenText.

## **Attention Management Skills is the fourth front that we need to address.**

As it relates to this, I want to share 5 Attention Management tips that are easy, practical, and will make an immediate impact on your ability to focus:

1. Turn Off ALL Notifications.
  - a. Notifications are bad. Why would we give the world a hotline to our brain? Turn all notifications off ... and I mean ALL of them.
    - i. In Outlook, email notifications can be turned off by navigating to File > Options > Mail and deselecting the four different methods of notifying you when a new message arrives.
    - ii. On an iPhone, go to Settings > Notifications and go through and turn off notifications by App.
2. Practice Single Tasking.
  - a. It is not enough to say that multi-tasking is bad. We need to practice single-tasking. We need to clear our desks AND our multiple monitors of information that is not directly relevant to the project that we are executing.
  - b. For example, you should always minimize Outlook on your second monitor unless you are batch processing emails, planning your upcoming tasks, or using that information for the task that you are performing. Why would you leave up on your beautiful 21" screen the single most chaotic distraction known to man in the 21st century ... Email. That is insane if you think about it.
  - c. Email feeds us distraction bombs every 30 seconds to 5 minutes. How can we possibly focus if we see those bombs land in our inbox? Just because we have 2 or 3 monitors, doesn't mean that we need to have something displayed on them, especially if the information displayed derails our ability to focus on the task in front of us!
3. Pomodoro.
  - a. Pomodoro is an easy technique that utilizes the 25-minute tomato timer. We single-task (preferably deep-thought work) for 25 minutes and then take a break and do something relaxing for 5 minutes. In other words, we work in intervals. The human brain functions very well, maintaining attention to a single task for 25 minutes. After 25 minutes, we begin to lose focus. By giving ourselves a 5 minute break, we can return to deep-thought work for another 25 minutes very easily. Feel free to adjust the 25 minutes to something a bit longer if you want. I know a lot of folks who work 40 minutes or longer and take a 5-10 minute break. This technique will make a huge impact on productivity and will also help combat procrastination. Think about it, we can endure even the most tedious dreaded task for 25 minutes, right? Once we get a little momentum going and we get immersed in the project, it becomes a lot easier.
    - i. One important note: Do not process emails during your 5 minute break! Take a real break and do something relaxing like getting some fresh air or water, or take a 2-3 minute walk.

4. Tackle Deep-Thought Work Early in the Day (or when rested).
  - a. Dive into deep-thought work, writing, projects early morning. There is little question about it ... our brains function better following quiet time or sleep. We also know that we can be highly productive while the rest of the world is sleeping because there are far fewer (if any) interruptions. This can be one of the most productive times of the day.
  
5. Create Rituals.
  - a. Rituals are small checklists or short rigid schedules designed to execute the same desired tasks during a set period of time. Rituals keep you on task. They are extremely helpful because they help us form positive habits and prevent us from taking email or internet curiosity breaks. As an example, I have a morning administrative ritual whenever I am physically in the office and not speaking. It looks something like this:
    - Eat breakfast at my desk (Oatmeal)
    - Fish oil, garlic & vitamins
    - Reach out to one new organization for business development (speaking)
    - Ask a potential client or existing client to grab coffee in a city where I am speaking
    - Review my potential new client report
    - Reach out to past clients without active matters just to check in
    - Check in on recent clients/projects
    - Business social media
    - Birthday wishes
    - Check in with my leadership team members
    - Check in with my partners
    - Check in with my immediate team
  - b. Rituals also remind us to do things that we frequently forget ... things that we commit ourselves to do as New Year resolutions or annual goals. By adding rituals and checklists into your life, you can greatly enhance your ability to focus and do those things that seem to always fall off our radar. I discovered an awesome App for the iPhone/iPad called Checklist Again to organize all my daily rituals.