

Introduction

From Hooked to Indistractable

There's a certain yellow book you'll find on the shelves of most major tech companies. I've seen it at Facebook, Google, PayPal, and Slack. It's given out at tech conferences and company training events. A friend working at Microsoft told me the CEO, Satya Nadella, held up a copy and recommended it to all the company's employees.

The book, *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, was a *Wall Street Journal* best seller and, at the time of this writing, still ranks as the number one book in the "Products" category on Amazon. It's a cookbook, of sorts. The book contains a recipe for human behavior—your behavior. These tech companies know that in order to make money, they need to keep us coming back—their business models depend on it.

I know this because I've spent the past decade researching the hidden psychology that some of the most successful companies in the world use to make their products so captivating. For years, I taught future executives at both the Stanford Graduate School of Business and at the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design.

In writing *Hooked*, my hope was that start-ups and socially concerned companies would use this knowledge to design new ways of helping people build better habits. Why should the tech giants keep these secrets to themselves? Shouldn't we use the same psychology that makes video games and social media so engaging to design products to help people live better lives?

Since *Hooked* was published, thousands of companies have used the book to

empower their users to build helpful and healthy habits. Fitbod is a fitness app that helps people build better exercise routines. Byte Foods seeks to change people's eating habits with internet-connected pantries that offer locally made fresh meals. Kahoot! builds software to make classroom learning more engaging and fun.¹

We want our products to be user friendly, easy to navigate, and yes, habit-forming. Companies making their products more engaging isn't necessarily a problem—it's progress.

But there's also a dark side. As philosopher Paul Virilio wrote, "[When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck.](#)" In the case of user-friendly products and services, what makes some products engaging and easy to use can also make them distracting.

For many people, these distractions can get out of hand, leaving us with a feeling that our decisions are not our own. The fact is, in this day and age, if you are not equipped to manage distraction, your brain will be manipulated by time-wasting diversions.

In the next few pages, I'll reveal my own struggle with distraction, and how I, ironically, got hooked. But I'll also share how I overcame my struggle and explain why we are much more powerful than any of the tech giants. As an industry insider, I know their Achilles' heel—and soon you will too.

The good news is that we have the unique ability to adapt to such threats. We can take steps right now to retrain and regain our brains. To be blunt, what other choice do we have? We don't have time to wait for regulators to do something, and if you hold your breath waiting for corporations to make their products less distracting, well, you're going to suffocate.

In the future, there will be two kinds of people in the world: those who let their attention and lives be controlled and coerced by others and those who proudly call themselves "indistractable." By opening this book, you've taken the first step toward owning your time and your future.

But you're just getting started. For years you've been conditioned to expect instant gratification. Think of getting to the last page of *Indistractable* as a personal challenge to liberate your mind.

The antidote to impulsiveness is forethought. Planning ahead ensures you will follow through. With the techniques in this book, you'll learn exactly what to do from this day forth to control your attention and choose your life.

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¹ I loved the way Kahoot! and Byte Foods used my book so much that I decided to invest in both companies.

Chapter 1

What's Your Superpower?

I love sweets, I love social media, and I love television. However, as much as I love these things, they don't love me back. Overeating a sugary indulgence after a meal, spending too much time scrolling a feed, or indulging in a Netflix binge until 2 am were all things I once did with little or no conscious thought—out of habit.

Just as eating too much junk food leads to health problems, the overuse of devices can also have negative consequences. For me, it was the way I prioritized distractions over the most important people in my life. Worst of all was what I let distractions do to my relationship with my daughter. She's our only child and, to my wife and me, the most amazing kid in the world.

One particular day, the two of us were playing games from an activity book designed to bring dads and daughters closer together. The first activity involved naming each other's favorite things. The next project was building a paper airplane with one of the pages. The third was a question we both had to answer: "If you could have any superpower, what would it be?"

I wish I could tell you what my daughter said at that moment, but I can't. I have no idea because I wasn't really there. I was physically in the room, but my mind was elsewhere. "Daddy," she said, "what would your superpower be?"

"Huh?" I grunted. "Just a second. I just need to respond to this one thing." I dismissed her as I attended to something on my phone. My eyes were still glued to my screen, fingers tapping away at something that seemed important at the time but could definitely have waited. She went quiet. By the time I looked up, she was gone.

I had just blown a magical moment with my daughter because something on my phone had grabbed my attention. On its own, it was no big deal. But if I told you this was an isolated incident, I'd be lying. This same scene had played out countless times before.

I wasn't the only one putting distractions before people. An early reader of this book told me that when he asked his eight-year-old daughter what her superpower would be, she said she wanted to talk to animals. When asked why, the child said, "So that I have someone to talk to when you and mom are too busy working on your computers."

After finding my daughter and apologizing, I decided it was time for a change. At first, I went extreme. Convinced it was all technology's fault, I tried a "digital detox." I started using an old-school flip phone so I couldn't be tempted to use email, Instagram, and Twitter. But I found it too difficult to get around without GPS and the addresses saved inside my calendar app. I missed listening to audiobooks while I walked, as well as all the other handy things my smartphone could do.

To avoid wasting time reading too many news articles online, I purchased a subscription to the print edition of a newspaper. A few weeks later, I had a stack of unread papers piled neatly next to me as I watched the news on TV.

In an attempt to stay focused while writing, I bought a 1990s word processor without an internet connection. However, whenever I'd sit down to write, I'd find myself glancing at the bookshelf and would soon start flipping through books unrelated to my work. Somehow, I kept getting distracted, even without the tech that I thought was the source of the problem.

Removing online technology didn't work. I'd just replaced one distraction with another.

I discovered that living the life we want requires not only doing the *right* things; it also requires we stop doing the *wrong* things that take us off track. We all know eating cake is worse for our waistlines than having a healthy salad. We agree that aimlessly scrolling our social media feeds is not as enriching as

spending time with real friends in real life. We understand that if we want to be more productive at work, we need to stop wasting time and actually *do* the work. We already know what to do. What we don't know is how to stop getting distracted.

In researching and writing this book over the past five years, and by following the science-backed methods you'll soon learn, I'm now more productive, physically and mentally stronger, better rested, and more fulfilled in my relationships than I've ever been. This book is about what I learned as I developed the most important skill for the twenty-first century. It's about how I became indistractable, and how you can too.

The first step is to recognize that distraction starts from within. In [part one](#), you'll learn practical ways to identify and manage the psychological discomfort that leads us off track. However, I steer clear of recommending well-worn techniques like mindfulness and meditation. While these methods can be effective for some people, they have already been written about ad nauseam. If you're reading this book, my guess is you've already tried those techniques and, like me, found they didn't quite do the trick for you. Instead, we'll take a fresh look at what really motivates our behavior and learn why time management is pain management. We'll also explore how to make just about any task enjoyable—not in the Mary Poppins way of “adding a spoonful of sugar,” but by cultivating the ability to focus intensely on what we're doing.

[Part two](#) will look at the importance of making time for the things you really want to do. You'll learn why you can't call something a “distraction” unless you know what it is distracting you *from*. You'll learn to plan your time with intention, even if you choose to spend it scrolling through celebrity headlines or reading a steamy romance novel. [After all, the time you plan to waste is not wasted time.](#)

[Part three](#) follows with a no-holds-barred examination of the unwanted external triggers that hamper our productivity and diminish our well-being. While technology companies use cues like the pings and dings on our phones to hack our behavior, external triggers are not confined to our digital devices. They're all around us—from cookies beckoning when we open the kitchen cabinet to a chatty coworker keeping us from finishing a time-sensitive project.

[Part four](#) holds the last key to making you indistractable: pacts. While removing external triggers is helpful in keeping distractions *out*, pacts are a proven way of reining ourselves *in*, ensuring we do what we say we're going to

do. In this part, we'll apply the ancient practice of precommitment to modern challenges.

Finally, we'll take an in-depth look at how to make your workplace indistractable, raise indistractable kids, and foster indistractable relationships. These final chapters will show you how to regain lost productivity at work, have more satisfying relationships with your friends and family, and even be a better lover—all by conquering distraction.

You're welcome to navigate the four steps to becoming indistractable however you like, but I recommend you proceed in order through [parts one to four](#). The four modalities build on each other, with the first step being the most foundational.

If you're the kind of person who likes to learn by example, and you want to see these tactics in action first, feel free to read parts five and on, then come back through the first four parts for a deeper explanation. Also, there's no requirement to adopt each and every technique right away. Some might not fit your current situation and only become useful in the future when you're ready or your circumstances change. But I promise you that by the time you finish this book, you will discover several breakthroughs that will change the way you manage distraction forever.

Imagine the incredible power of following through on your intentions. How much more effective would you be at work? How much more time could you spend with your family or doing the things you love? How much happier would you be?

What would life be like if your superpower was being indistractable?

REMEMBER THIS

- **We need to learn how to avoid distraction.** Living the lives we want not only requires doing the right things but also necessitates *not* doing the things we know we'll regret.
- **The problem is deeper than tech.** Being indistractable isn't about being a Luddite. It's about understanding the real reasons why we do things against our best interests.
- **Here's what it takes:** We can be indistractable by learning and adopting four key strategies.

Chapter 2

Being Indistractable

The ancient Greeks immortalized the story of a man who was perpetually distracted. We call something that is desirable but just out of reach “tantalizing” after his name. [The story goes that Tantalus was banished to the underworld](#) by his father, Zeus, as a punishment. There he found himself wading in a pool of water while a tree dangled ripe fruit above his head. The curse seems benign, but when Tantalus tried to pluck the fruit, the branch moved away from him, always just out of reach. When he bent down to drink the cool water, it receded so that he could never quench his thirst. Tantalus’s punishment was to yearn for things he desired but could never grasp.

You have to hand it to the ancient Greeks for their allegories. It’s hard to portray a better representation of the human condition. We are constantly reaching for something: more money, more experiences, more knowledge, more status, more *stuff*. The ancient Greeks thought this was just part of the curse of being a fallible mortal and used the story to portray the power of our incessant desires.



Tantalus's curse—forever reaching for something.

TRACTION AND DISTRACTION

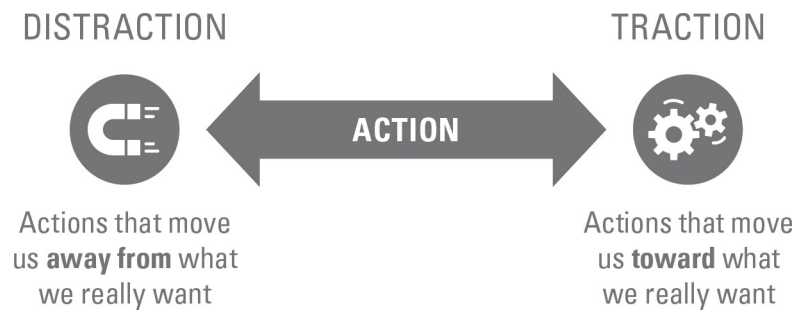
Imagine a line that represents the value of everything you do throughout your day. To the right, the actions are positive; to the left, they are negative.

On the right side of the continuum is *traction*, which comes from the Latin *trahere*, meaning “to draw or pull.” We can think of traction as the actions that draw us toward what we want in life. On the left side is *distraction*, the opposite of traction. **Derived from the same Latin root**, the word means the “drawing away of the mind.” Distractions impede us from making progress toward the life we envision. All behaviors, whether they tend toward traction or distraction, are prompted by triggers, internal or external.

Internal triggers cue us from within. When we feel our belly growl, we look for a snack. When we're cold, we find a coat to warm up. And when we're sad, lonely, or stressed, we might call a friend or loved one for support.

External triggers, on the other hand, are cues in our environment that tell us what to do next, like the pings, dings, and rings that prompt us to check our emails, open a news alert, or answer a phone call. External triggers can also take the form of other people, such as a coworker who stops by our desk. They can

also be objects, like a television set whose mere presence urges us to turn it on.

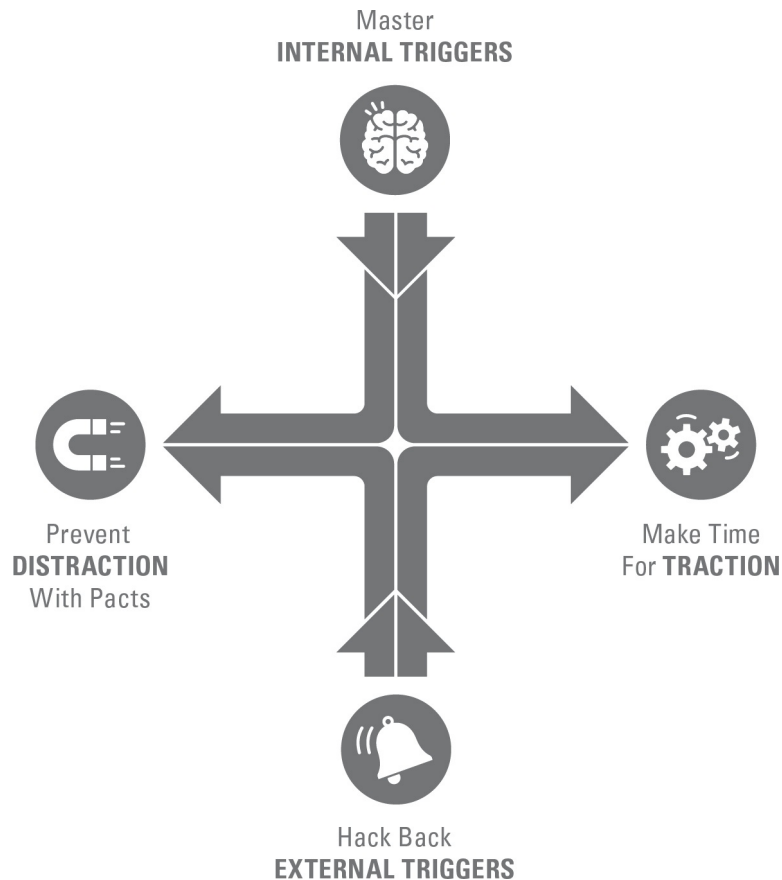


Whether prompted by internal or external triggers, the resulting action is either aligned with our broader intention (traction) or misaligned (distraction). Traction helps us accomplish goals; distraction leads us away from them.

The challenge, of course, is that our world has always been full of things designed to distract us. Today, people find themselves attached to their mobile phones, but they are only the latest potential hindrance. [People complained about the brain-melting power of television](#) since its inception. Before that, it was the telephone, comic books, and the radio. [Even the written word was blamed for creating](#) “forgetfulness in the learners’ souls,” according to Socrates. Though some of these things seem dull in comparison to today’s enticements, distractions have and always will be facts of life.

Today’s distractions, however, feel different. The amount of information available, the speed at which it can be disseminated, and the ubiquity of access to new content on our devices has made for a trifecta of distraction. If it’s a distraction you seek, it’s easier than ever to find.

What is the cost of all that distraction? In 1971 the psychologist Herbert A. Simon presciently wrote, [“The wealth of information means a dearth of something else . . . a poverty of attention.”](#) [Researchers tell us attention and focus are the raw materials](#) of human creativity and flourishing. In the age of increased automation, the most sought-after jobs are those that require creative problem-solving, novel solutions, and the kind of human ingenuity that comes from focusing deeply on the task at hand.



Socially, we see that close friendships are the bedrock of our psychological and physical health. [Loneliness, according to researchers, is more dangerous than obesity.](#) But, of course, we can't cultivate close friendships if we're constantly distracted.

Consider our children. How can they flourish if they can't concentrate long enough to apply themselves? What example are we setting for them if our loving faces are replaced by the tops of our heads as we constantly stare into our screens?

Let's think back to the tale of Tantalus. What was his curse exactly? Was it never-ending hunger and thirst? Not really. What would have happened to Tantalus if he had just stopped reaching? He was already in hell, after all, and dead people don't *need* food and water, last time I checked.

The curse is not that Tantalus spends all eternity reaching for things just out of reach, but rather his obliviousness to the greater folly of his actions. Tantalus's curse was his blindness to the fact he didn't need those things in the first place. That's the real moral of the story.

Tantalus's curse is also our curse. We are compelled to reach for things we

supposedly need but really don't. We don't *need* to check our email right this second or *need* to see the latest trending news, no matter how much we feel we must.

Fortunately, unlike Tantalus, we can step back from our desires, recognize them for what they are, and do something about them. We want companies to innovate and solve our evolving needs, yet we must also ask whether better products bring out our best selves. Distractions will always exist; managing them is our responsibility.

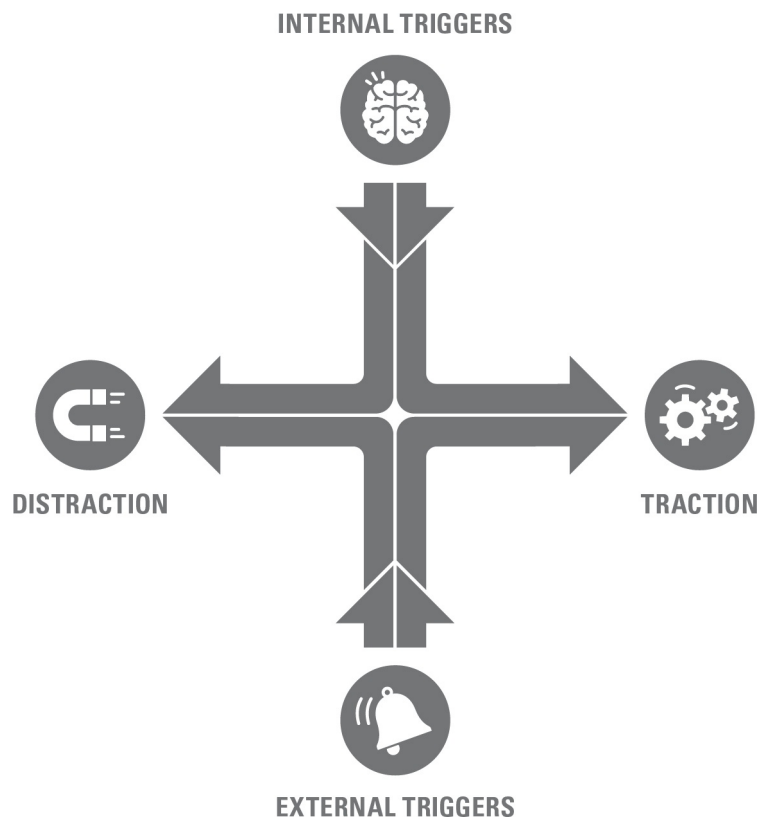
Being indistractable means striving to do what you say you will do.

Indistractable people are as honest with themselves as they are with others. If you care about your work, your family, and your physical and mental well-being, you must learn how to become indistractable. The four-part Indistractable Model is a tool for seeing and interacting with the world in a new way. It will serve as your map for controlling your attention and choosing your life.

REMEMBER THIS

- **Distraction stops you from achieving your goals.** It is any action that moves you away from what you really want.
- **Traction leads you closer to your goals.** It is any action that moves you toward what you really want.
- **Triggers prompt both traction and distraction.** External triggers prompt you to action with cues *in your environment*. Internal triggers prompt you to action with cues *within you*.

THE INDISTRACTABLE MODEL



These four steps are your guide to becoming indistractable.