

## 0.1 Chapter 2: work: Pleasures of Work

## 0.2 Pleasures of Work

### 1 Monasticism & How to Avoid Distraction

Human beings are pathetically prone to distraction. Its almost comically easy to get us to stop concentrating on anything even a tiny bit challenging and turn gratefully to something more immediately gratifying or interesting and almost certainly a lot less productive; like picking ones nose, viewing porn, checking whether theres a custard cream in the biscuit tin, seeing whats happening to the Greek economy or the career of Jeremy Clarkson.

We all suffer from distraction. But collectively we have been very reluctant to take serious steps to address it.

We do a *few things*, of course: like have open plan offices and KPIs which wont be met unless a person keeps their capacity for distraction under some kind of control. All the same, distraction remains a scourge and undermines our productivity to an astonishing degree. Because when we really are in focus and in the mood and fired up, its amazing what we can achieve in a short time. And hence slightly shocking to imagine what one might be able to do were the attention not always wandering off.

In the Middle Ages, it was widely agreed that the most important thing to think about was God. Today, the thing we most have to focus attention on is usually work. But unlike in our own day, back in the Middle Ages, leading figures were prepared to accept that asking for prolonged *non-distracted* attention means making a huge and very difficult (but maybe very important) demand on the fragile and wayward human psyche. They were prepared to see just how big and difficult a demand this really was for creatures like us more naturally interested in things like feasting, sex, scratching their bottoms, hunting and gambling, than in pondering the divine nature, examining our own failings or seeking to understand the meaning of some of the more obscure sections of the Bible.

They took very seriously the problem of getting people to pay attention to what they considered the important things and stop getting distracted. And they realised that you might need to take some pretty drastic-looking steps to keep the mind in focus on the key things. One of the key moves they made was the invention of the Monastery.



Praglia Abbey

The monastery made a range of dazzling innovations in the field of non-distraction studies. For example, it proposed that to avoid distraction, one might need to live far removed from towns and cities. The architecture should be rather grand and imposing as a continual reminder of the importance of what you are doing. One should live on-site and not commute in. The walls are going to have to be high and thick. There cant be lots of doors or big picture windows looking out onto the wider world.

Walls, cloisters and being a good few miles from the local tavernas certainly help in the fight against distraction; but on their own, they are not enough. Medieval Christianity additionally developed *rules* about how to live in and use these buildings. One of the earliest and most influential rule-setters was a Roman nobleman living at the end of the 5th century, by the name of Benedict. He founded a number of monasteries in Italy and he wrote an instruction manual for his followers, with a simple and emphatic title: *The Rule*.





#### **1.0.0.0.1 Early anti-distraction guru**

The rules were beautifully precise and detailed. They include thoughts on:

##### **Eating:**

*Rule 39: Except the sick who are very weak,*

*let all abstain entirely*

*from eating the flesh of four-footed animals.*

One should consume modest, but nutritious, meals only twice a day (an occasional glass of wine is allowed). Lamb and beef are to be avoided. But chicken and fish in small quantities are helpful. During meals, people are not allowed to talk to one another. Instead they should listen to someone reading

from an important and interesting book. If they need something they should make a signal with their hands.

### **Silence:**

You need to be quiet quite a lot, and for this to be the norm. You are only allowed to talk in certain places and at certain times. Otherwise, keep quiet. When you do talk with others, gossip and malicious comments are strictly forbidden.

### **Hair and Clothing:**

To avoid distraction you need to wear clothes that are basically the same as those of everyone else in the community. Something plain and useful. Not too expensive. Nothing to distract you there. Also, everyone must have their hair cut the same way very very short.

### **Balance:**

*Rule 35: Let the brethren serve one another,  
and let no one be excused from the kitchen service  
except by reason of sickness*

If you are going to be concentrating quite a lot on ideas or intellectual activities you must take some physical activity everyday, something repetitive and soothing might be ideal: like sweeping the floor or weeding a row of lettuces. You must also occasionally take your turn preparing a meal or doing the washing up everyone does. But mostly it will be other peoples turns so youll be free (and guilt free).

### **Ordering the day**

You have to go to bed early and get up very early. Routine is crucial. Youll be doing the same thing at the same time day after day. It will soon become a habit.

### **Keep sex away**

Everyone is to dress and behave in a demure way. No encouragement to be given to sexual feelings. Sex plays havoc with any attempts to concentrate.

### **Art**

At many strategic points in the buildings, youll see beautiful or dramatic works of art that remind you of some important idea or help you get into a useful mood.





#### **1.0.0.0.2 When you look up from your workstation a reminder that suffering is an essential part of life**

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Today, were unlikely to be preoccupied with getting ourselves focused and distraction-free in the name of our relationship with God. Its around work that this issue arises. Work is a hugely important theme in our lives and were expected (almost required) to spend years concentrating on writing reports or preparing accounts, pondering how best to give feedback or assessing the options for a new distribution terminal in Lancashire. Well manage it, but as things stand much much less efficiently that we ideally could. Much of the time we will be being paid to drag ourselves mentally back to the task in hand for another tiny burst before feeling the tug of a daydream, the speculation about where someone got their new shoes, the annoying way ones hair is sticking up a bit on the left side, the decision about what kind of sandwiches to have for lunch...

As a way to end the tragic dominance of distraction, we suggest a number of strategies, with the example of St Benedict in mind:

### **One: Office uniforms**

Ideally, elegant but modest enough to dampen down libidinous thoughts.

### **Two: Physical exercise**

Integrate brief doses of gardening or maintenance work into the schedule of executives.

### **Three: Ban the internet**

Its sounds prudish, naive or dated. But its really ambition for our lives that drives this kind of censorship; and the humiliating admission that generally we are a bit rubbish at self-control. We cant spend the rest of our lives checking the *Mail Online*.

### **Four: Chatter**

Periods of silence and collective reading are to be encouraged and personal gossip banned.

### **Five: Architecture**

Tranquil, grand; facilities for periods of live-in work. Fewer open plan offices. More cells.

### **Six: Art**

Strategic reminders of the nobility of labour.

If you want to focus your mind on something serious and quite difficult, youre probably going to have to take some quite radical steps to make this happen. Youre maybe going to have to look a bit weird and do things that will strike some people as rather odd. But thats only because our society has not really admitted to itself how big a grip distraction actually has on us.