

The Age of Distraction by Leo Babauta

We live in curious times. It's called the Age of Information, but in another light it can be called the Age of Distraction. While humanity has never been free of distraction – from swatting those bothersome gnats around the fireplace to dealing with piles of paper mail and ringing telephones – never have the distractions been so voluminous, so overwhelming, so intense, so persistent as they are now. Ringing phones are one thing, but email notifications, Twitter and Facebook messages, an array of browser tabs open, and mobile devices that are always on and always beeping are quite another. More and more, we are connected, we are up to our necks in the stream of information, we are in the crossfire of the battle for our attention, and we are engaged in a harrying blur of multitasking activity.

Information
and
Distractions

When we're working, we have distractions coming from every direction. In front of us is the computer, with email notifications and other notifications of all kinds. Then there's the addicting lure of the browser, which contains not only an endless amount of reading material that can be a black hole into which we never escape, but unlimited opportunities for shopping, for chatting with other people, for gossip and news and lurid photos and so much more. All the while, several new emails have come in, waiting for a quick response. Several programs are open at once, each of them with tasks to complete. Several people would like to chat, dividing our attention even further.

Digital
Distractions

And that's just in front of us. From the sides come a ringing desk phone, a ringing mobile device, music from several different coworkers, a colleague coming to our desk asking a question, incoming papers needing attention, other papers scattered across our desks, someone calling a meeting, another offering up food.

External
Distractions

With so much competing for our attention, and so little time to focus on real work, it's a wonder we get anything done at all. And then we leave work, but the attack on our attention doesn't end. We bring the mobile device, with incoming text and email messages, all needing a reply, with incoming calls that can't be ignored. We have reading material, either in paper form or on the mobile device, to keep our attention occupied. We are bombarded from all sides by advertising, asking for not only attention but our desires.

Attention

We get home, and there's the television, constantly blaring, with 500 channels all asking for yet more attention, with 500,000 ads asking for yet more desires. There's our home computer, asking us to do more work, sending us more messages, more distractions, social networks and shopping and reading. There are kids or spouses or roommates or friends, there's the home phone, and still the mobile device is going off.

Information
Overload

This is unprecedented, and it's alarming. We've come into this Age without being aware that it was happening, or realizing its consequences. Sure, we knew that the Internet was proliferating, and we were excited about that. We knew that mobile devices were becoming more and more ubiquitous, and maybe some people harrumphed and others welcomed the connectivity. But while the opportunities offered by this online world are a good thing, the constant distractions, the increasingly urgent pull on our attention, the stress of multitasking at an ever-finer granular level, the erosion of our free time and our ability to live with a modicum of peace ... perhaps we didn't realize how much this would change our lives.

Impact
On Our
Lives