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ABSTRACT

To understand why, we've got to talk about both human psychology and the increasing sophistication of our computing devices -- all of which, being built by companies with powerful financial incentives to capture our attention, are now instruments of what I call the distraction-industrial complex. [...]Apple's forthcoming operating system for iPhone promises to transform these alerts into even more sophisticated interruption machines, allowing us to answer messages and interact with apps right in the alerts themselves, without even unlocking our phones.

FULL TEXT

Of all the potentially embarrassing things I confess to friends and acquaintances, perhaps the one most guaranteed to get a reaction is this: I don't have broadband Internet at home. And here's something I've never said aloud: I don't think you should, either, because it is ruining your productivity, if not your life.

I'd love to tell you my disconnection is deliberate, but it is mostly a consequence of living on the top floor of an extraordinarily old and bohemianly cared-for building, in which, despite my best attempts, both the phone and cable companies simply can't get me connected. (I do keep my phone on.)

Sometimes this is an issue. Getting work done at home requires that I tether my laptop to my cellphone, which results in slow performance and, if I'm not careful, outrageous cellphone bills.

But, as I have discovered, it also means freedom. Barring emergency, work is confined to work hours. This forces me to be more efficient at the office even as it allows me to be more emotionally present when I'm not there.

It also has led me to notice that the times I am most productive while working are when I have no Internet connection at all -- on planes, buses and trains.

To understand why, we've got to talk about both human psychology and the increasing sophistication of our computing devices -- all of which, being built by companies with powerful financial incentives to capture our attention, are now instruments of what I call the distraction-industrial complex.

First, there's the matter of our frail psyches. The best research we have tells us that, given the opportunity, humans tend to interrupt ourselves on average every three minutes. We'll switch from a Web browser to a Word document, for example. These interruptions are fairly harmless as long as they are related to the task at hand.

What's devastating to our productivity: interruptions we didn't invite, especially if they draw our attention to an unrelated task, such as an incoming email, instant message or other alert.

One study from Microsoft indicated that programmers who were interrupted by an incoming email lost 10 minutes every time they switched from their original task, on top of however long it took them to answer the email. Earlier studies suggest that workers lose as much as 40% of their productive time when they are regularly interrupted.

And yet every trend in consumer and enterprise technology is toward more frequent and effective interruptions. It began with the introduction, around 2009, of the "push" notification on smartphones. Before that, only text messages showed up on the screens of our devices. With push, suddenly any app could set our phone buzzing and chiming.

Entire empires have been built on the push notification; they are the only reason messaging apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat work, and they are key to getting people to engage with services such as Facebook and Twitter.

Based on public numbers, Twitter users who visit its site or open its app at least once a month are looking at Twitter seven times a day, on average. That means that a sizable chunk of users are checking Twitter dozens of times a day, to balance out the ones who barely engage with the service. And Facebook, according to comScore, represents 20% of the time the average American spends on their mobile phone. Would the number be so high if our phones weren't alerting us every time someone "liked" our latest update?

And it's only going to get worse. The Android-powered smartwatches Google just unveiled vibrate every time the wearer receives an alert on his or her phone. If your phone is set to show incoming emails, texts, and even one or two messaging apps or social networks, that means the smartwatch might vibrate dozens or even hundreds of times a day.

Google Glass wants to put those alerts where you can't possibly escape them: right in front of your eyes. And Apple's forthcoming operating system for iPhone promises to transform these alerts into even more sophisticated interruption machines, allowing us to answer messages and interact with apps right in the alerts themselves, without even unlocking our phones.

The technologically savvy among you are already saying: "Well, you can turn those alerts off!" But who does? "Fear of missing out" means most people allow some kind of push notification on their phone, and the social expectation that everyone is instantly reachable pressures us to leave open channels for real-time communication.

In general, people underestimate the cost of these distractions, partly because we underestimate the effects of what psychologists call "ego depletion." The idea is that we have only so much willpower. Some neuroscientists believe the brain literally runs out of its fuel, glucose, when we have to perform cognitively demanding tasks. But exercising the self control required to not answer that incoming email is also cognitively demanding.

In other words, in a world full of interruptions, we can't win; engaging and choosing not to engage with a push notification both take their toll, leading to worse performance on the things we're actually supposed to get done.

Which brings me back to my ongoing quest to find places to avoid the Internet. The balance of evidence isn't just that we aren't able to manage distractions on our own, it is that we shouldn't be asked to.

There is nothing wrong with connectivity, apps, alerts and social media, if we engage with them on our own terms. But the limitations of our minds mean we have to be able to reduce our decision to engage with them or not to a straightforward, binary choice we should be asked to make as few times a day as possible: To connect, or not.

Credit: By Christopher Mims

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LINKS

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The Biggest Distraction in the Office Is Sitting Next to You

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ABSTRACT

Employees who experienced frequent interruptions reported 9% higher rates of exhaustion -- almost as big as the 12% increase in fatigue caused by oversize workloads, according to a survey of 252 working adults published recently in the International Journal of Stress Management. Nurses at 24 Kaiser Permanente hospitals wear bright-colored sashes or vests to prevent interruptions while they are preparing medications for patients, says Scott Heisler, a registered nurse and innovation specialist for the nonprofit health plan and hospital system based in Oakland, Calif.

FULL TEXT

The big push in office design is forcing co-workers to interact more. Cubicle walls are lower, office doors are no more and communal cafes and snack bars abound.

Like most grand social experiments, though, open-plan offices bring an unintended downside: pesky, productivity-sapping interruptions.

The most common disruptions come from co-workers, as tempting as it is to blame email or instant messaging. Face-to-face interruptions account for one-third more intrusions than email or phone calls, which employees feel freer to defer or ignore, according to a 2011 study in the journal Organization Studies.

Other research published earlier this year links frequent interruptions to higher rates of exhaustion, stress-induced ailments and a doubling of error rates.

It's easy to turn to a neighbor for, say, tips on how to tweak a spread sheet or where to go for lunch. But such interruptions -- which many feel it would be rude to rebuff -- nibble away at the ability to stay on task.

There's a range of compensating behaviors. Some wear headphones. Some invent "do-not-disturb" signals like wearing hats or armbands, or stretching yellow barricade tape around their cubicles. More employers are training co-workers to communicate differently, and to limit unscheduled meetings.

Employees in cubicles are interrupted 29% more often than those in private offices, research from the University of California, Irvine, shows. Intercubicle traffic at one telecommunications company peaked daily from 2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m., when employees played music, talked over cubicle walls or walked among each other's desks, according to the research published in Organization Studies.

Such patterns can be costly. Employees who experienced frequent interruptions reported 9% higher rates of

exhaustion -- almost as big as the 12% increase in fatigue caused by oversize workloads, according to a survey of 252 working adults published recently in the International Journal of Stress Management. Interruptions also sparked a 4% increase in physical ailments such as migraines or backaches, says the study.

Error rates skyrocket after interruptions. Participants in a recent 300-person study were asked to perform a sequence of computer tasks, such as identifying with a keystroke whether a letter was closer to the start or the end of the alphabet. After even a brief interruption of about 2.8 seconds, when they were asked to type two letters, the subjects made twice as many errors, says the study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: General.

"Two seconds is long enough to make people lose the thread," says Erik Altmann, a psychology professor at Michigan State University in East Lansing, and the study's lead author.

To make matters worse, it takes more than 25 minutes, on average, to resume a task after being interrupted. After resuming a complex task such as design or programming, says Tom DeMarco, co-author of "Peopleware," a book on productivity now in its third edition, it takes an additional 15 minutes to regain the same intense focus or "flow" as before the interruption, based on an 800-employee study for the book.

While another study by Dr. Altmann found people working in controlled laboratory conditions were capable of getting back up to speed on complex computer tasks within 15 seconds of being interrupted, few people actually dive right back into a demanding task after an intrusion. Most employees attend to two or more other tasks first, research shows. "It takes effort to get back into it. That work is aversive, so you start checking your email," Dr. Altmann says.

In some professions, breaks in concentration can result in serious consequences. Nurses at 24 Kaiser Permanente hospitals wear bright-colored sashes or vests to prevent interruptions while they are preparing medications for patients, says Scott Heisler, a registered nurse and innovation specialist for the nonprofit health plan and hospital system based in Oakland, Calif.

Some Kaiser hospitals also mark off "no-interruption zones" near medication dispensaries, using red floor tape or different-colored floor tiles, he says. Mr. Heisler says Kaiser got the idea for the program from federal regulators' "sterile-cockpit rule" for the airline industry, which prohibits interrupting pilots during critical times, such as takeoffs and landings.

A variety of quirky solutions are being marketed to cubicle dwellers. CubeGuard, of San Jose, Calif., makes neon-yellow plastic "do not disturb" barricade tape, to block off cubicle entries.

More than 6,500 workers each year download a free "Interrupters' Log Worksheet" from MindTools.com, a career-skills website, to help them analyze the sources of interruptions and either eliminate or reorganize them to save time, says James Manktelow, chief executive of Mind Tools.

One way people can dive back into a task more quickly and reduce errors, research shows, is by bookmarking their place, marking the next step with a large, bright symbol such as a red arrow.

Laura Stack, a Denver productivity trainer and author, suggests asking an interrupter to wait while you record your last thought on a sticky note, then posting the note on the page or screen to mark where you stopped working. The visual cue can cut the time needed to restart a task by as much as 80%, she says.

Ms. Stack also trains employee teams in triage -- learning to interrupt each other only when a problem is a top priority. For less-important matters, employees often can send a meeting request.

Sheri Caldwell says she saves time using another strategy recommended by Ms. Stack -- telling interrupters she'll meet them a few minutes later in their own office. That lets her complete the task she's working on, and take control over the length of the meeting. "Not only can you do it on your schedule, but you can leave when you want to," says Ms. Caldwell, a human-resource manager for a Toledo, Ohio, insurance firm.

Maura Thomas, an Austin, Texas, speaker and trainer on productivity, suggests breaking the habit of jumping up to talk to a colleague any time a question comes up. Instead, she advises keeping a separate "talk-to" list of topics for each colleague, then waiting until you have several items and setting a meeting.

Sometimes there is no replacement for a door that closes. Schaefer Advertising recently moved its Fort Worth, Texas, headquarters into new open-plan offices in a remodeled apartment building. The agency's 16 employees can talk and move freely among each other's desks.

But the agency also walled off three former patios on the front of the building to use as "privacy rooms." Account supervisor Erin Naterman retreated to one last month so she could gather her thoughts and write a business proposal. If a co-worker enters and closes the door, she says, "we know they don't want to be interrupted."

Barring an emergency, Ms. Naterman says, "we wait for them to come out."

Credit: By Sue Shellenbarger

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