

# To Control Your Life, Control What You Pay Attention To

*Reading from Harvard Business Review by Maura Thomas. March 15, 2018. Online article can be found [here](#).*

One of the best insights on what true productivity means in the 21st century dates back to 1890. In his book *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol.1, William James wrote a simple statement that's packed with meaning: "My experience is what I agree to attend to."

Your attention determines the experiences you have, and the experiences you have determine the life you live. Or said another way: you must control your attention to control your life. Today, in a world where so many experiences are blended together — where we can work from home (or a train or a plane or a beach), watch our kids on a nanny-cam from work, and distraction is always just a thumb-swipe away — has that ever been more true?

## Attention Management

To be consistently productive and manage stress better, we must strengthen our skill in attention management.

Attention management is the practice of controlling distractions, being present in the moment, finding flow, and maximizing focus, so that you can unleash your genius. It's about being intentional instead of reactive. It is the ability to recognize when your attention is being stolen (or has the potential to be stolen) and to instead keep it focused on the activities you choose. Rather than allowing distractions to derail you, you choose where you direct your attention at any given moment, based on an understanding of your priorities and goals.

Better attention management leads to improved productivity, but it's about much more than checking things off a to-do list. The ultimate result is the ability to create a life of choice, around things that are important to you. It's more than just exercising focus. It's about taking back control over your time and your priorities.

## Aspirations vs. Experiences

The leaders I work with tell me, "I believe in the power of mentoring and coaching my team members. The most important thing I can do as a leader is support them and encourage their growth. This is how I make a difference, and it's what gives me satisfaction at work."

But later in our conversation, I hear how their days actually go: "I spend a big chunk of my time on email and putting out fires. I started the year with a coaching plan for my team, but it's fallen by the wayside amid everything else that is going on. My one-on-ones with team members don't happen as often as I would like, and the content is too much 'trees' and not enough 'forest.'"

Even if you see yourself as a passionate advocate for coaching and mentoring, you won't have the impact you'd like if your actions and experiences don't reflect these values. As James said, your experience is what you attend to. And your experiences become your life. So if your attention continues getting diverted, and email, meetings, and "firefighting" consume your days, pretty soon weeks or months will have gone by and your life becomes full of the "experiences" you never really intended to have.

So why don't we just have the experiences we want to have, and create the lives we most want to lead? Why does this painful gulf exist between the selves we aspire to and how we spend our time?

The fact that James was thinking about this topic in the 19th century shows that we've long wrestled with the conflict between our goals and values and the lure of distractions. But, of course, we live in a world with many more distractions than existed in the 1890s. When he published *The Principles of Psychology*, the telephone was brand-new. Today, we have internet-connected phones and other devices that are always with us, delivering a volume of information and communication James couldn't have imagined. There's a lot more competition for our attention.

Let's go back to our mentoring and coaching example. You could start each day intending to focus on developing your team. But those intentions can quickly get swept away in the rush of demands that characterize our workdays.

In this frenzied work environment, accomplishing the things that are most meaningful to you doesn't just happen. You can't leave it to chance. Your busy environment presents choice after choice every day about what you will attend to — and what your experiences will be.

### Deliberately Choosing What You Attend To

This is where attention management offers a solution. It's a deliberate approach that puts you back in control. Practicing attention management means fighting back against the distractions and creating opportunities throughout your day to support your priorities. First, control external factors:

- Control your technology. Remember, it's there to serve you, not the other way around! Decide to take control by turning off email and "push" notifications which are specifically designed to steal your attention. This will allow you to engage in more stretches of focused work on tasks and activities that you choose. As often as possible and especially when you're working, keep your phone silent and out of sight.
- Control your environment. Set boundaries with others, especially in an open-office setting. For example, use headphones or put up a "do not disturb" sign when you need to focus. If that doesn't work, try going to a different part of your office, or even another floor of your building. If things are really bad, you can try teaming up with colleagues to

designate a certain time of day, or day of the week, a “no distractions” day for everyone to do heads-down work.

But here’s an overlooked truth: Our productivity suffers not just because we are distracted by outside interruptions, but also because our own brains, frazzled by today’s frantic workplaces, become a source of distraction in and of themselves.

For example, the problem isn’t just that an email interrupts your work. It’s also the fact that being tethered to your email inbox conditions you to expect an interruption every few minutes, which chips away at your attention span. You then become so afraid of forgetting to do some small task — like sending an email or forwarding a document — that you start to do everything as soon as you’ve thought of it; but then you end up getting sucked into your overflowing inbox before you know it. Moreover, knowing that you have a catalog of all the world’s knowledge at your fingertips — in terms of the internet on your smartphone — makes it difficult to be comfortable in a state of “I don’t know,” and hard to avoid the distracting temptation to “find out now.”

So you must also learn to control internal factors.

- Control your behavior. Use those times when your technology is tamed and your do-not-disturb sign is up to get used to single-tasking: open only one window on your computer screen, and give your full attention to one task until it’s complete, or until a designated stopping point. Take breaks throughout the day where you step away from your computer. Try to “unplug” completely (no technology) for at least an hour or more, as often as you can. Try it for 15-20 minutes at first; then build up to an hour, or even 90 minutes.
- Control your thoughts. For many of us, this is the hardest nut to crack, which is why I’ve left it to last. Minds are made to wander. Practice noticing when your mind is veering off in its own direction, and gently guide your focus back to where you want it. If you think of some important small task while you are doing focused work, jot it down on a notepad and come back to it later. Do the same with information you want to look up online.

Practicing attention management will not eliminate distractions from your day. But as you start to recognize when you become distracted, and build your “attention muscle” through habits like those above, you’ll start to reclaim your life and devote more of yourself to what’s really important to you. Don’t allow distraction to derail your aspirations and intentions. Instead, control your attention to control your life.

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