



To Be Online Is To Be Distracted

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“When you're online, you're always distracted,” observes Dr. John Medina, an affiliate Professor of Bioengineering at the University of Washington. Although initially we might want to refute the meaning of his observation, I conclude that it's entirely correct. Each time we are online, we are subject to whatever communication arrives from whoever in the world has access to our email, IM, or TM address.

Even when no new messages arrive, the possibility that one could appear deflects from the attention that we could otherwise have offered to a selected task. The ever-present opportunity to visit any one of multi-millions of websites helps to complete the formula for ensuring that you never quite concentrate to the best of your ability. Subtle, low-level distractions over hours, days and weeks, in the aggregate, add up to a different type of career and a different type of life than might otherwise unfold.

All too Commonplace

The experience of both being online while subjected to any potential message that could come in, and attempting to stay attuned to the task at hand, has become commonplace among career professionals.

Throughout the work day, and even after hours, our focus on and experience of any given event, activity, or sensation is muted when we allow our attention to become dissipated. Not a problem, you say? You get plenty done during the day, even with a constant flow of messages shuffling in?

I concede that many tasks don't notably suffer as a result of mini-intrusions. The nature of the tasks we are able to handle best throughout the course of a typical day, and the kinds of completions we achieve, however, inexorably become altered as a result of our “open-door” policy when it comes to external communications. This phenomenon accounts for why it is difficult for legions of career professionals today to maintain focus on longer-term projects and activities that require conceptual thinking.

First-time types of queries, absorbing new instructions, and exploring new paths are more difficult to achieve in an environment of constant new-message arrival. Yet some people are so heavily indoctrinated to this brave new world of attempting to get things done while constantly being distracted by the next incoming message (and the next, and the next) that they know no other way of proceeding.

For some people, the ability to offer constant attention and earnest thought on a singular task is beyond their grasp.

The long-term trend is not encouraging. With the acceleration of god-like technology, in E.O. Wilson's terms, our predisposition to allow mini-interruptions all day, for the balance of our lives, increasingly appears as if this is the way it is going to be.

The Next Generation

While it's disheartening to see this phenomenon take hold within an individual, it's frightening to contemplate what happens when an entire culture operates in this manner. In 1937, car manufacturers were concerned that the introduction of windshield wipers might prove to have a mesmerizing affect on drivers.

Flash forward 70 years and a preponderance of drivers have no qualms whatsoever about speeding down the highway at 60 mph in a 4,000 lb vehicle while fully engaged in conversation with someone who is not in the car – holding a cell phone to the ear with one hand and steering with the other. Dr. Medina tells us, “We are biologically incapable of processing attention-rich inputs simultaneously.”

Operating a moving vehicle and attempting to have a cell phone conversation each represent attention-rich inputs. We cannot safely entertain this all-too-common form of multi-tasking.

In the workplace, at home, and everywhere in between, dissipation of our attention propels us into a fast-forward world in which our psyche receives the message “you can't afford to slow down,” “you can't afford to maintain attention in one direction,” “you can't afford to forsake multi-tasking.”

The younger generation is immersed in a world where multi-tasking appears to be the norm, as if it has always been this way and multi-tasking will always rule. This is discouraging. Will they ever come to know the beauty of being able to focus on a single task, a single thought? Can peace of mind ever wholly be theirs? Or, is such a concern now a non-starter – not even part of the equation?

Step out of the Maelstrom

We are the masters of our fate, and we are the captains of our soul. Each of us, despite the distractions, can step out of the maelstrom and offer our best, indeed, give our all to the topic at hand while mustering the mental and emotional strength to forgo seeking, or even thinking about the next electronic message to arrive in our in-bins.