

INTRODUCTION

attention deficit trait

the growing workplace problem

You know the problem—swarms of distractions, constant interruptions, various tones chiming all around, rampant “screen sucking,” texting under the table during meetings, the overloading of mental circuits, and frequent feelings of frustration at trying to get everything done well and on time. This is the modern context in which most of us work. Whether the workplace itself or the numerous demands on your time drive you to distraction, the end result is the same. You can’t focus on anything anymore at work, and it’s taking its toll on your performance and your sense of well-being.

Capturing a widespread desperation, Ann Crittenden, in her *New York Times* review of Brigid Schulte’s sobering 2014 book, *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*, allowed that Schulte’s sensible solutions were “good suggestions,” but then punctuated her review with grim resignation: “But like all self-help advice, they don’t measure up against the entrenched forces that are indifferent if not

2 driven to distraction at work

hostile to the emotional well-being of a majority of Americans. Schulte is fighting SEAL Team Six with a pair of fingernail scissors.”¹

This book offers a different view. While I fully agree that we are contending with forces never seen before—and that the modern workplace presents distractions like never before—I also know that any person can learn to modulate distraction and overload well enough to take greater control, while becoming happier, healthier, and more productive in the process. To be sure, as Crittenden, Schulte, and numerous other commentators have shown in well-documented detail, the special forces that oppose a sane and measured life today advance en masse like invisible pincers, nipping at us wherever we turn. And this isn’t going to let up. If anything, the number of distractions will continue to grow, exponentially. This is why all the commonly offered advice—such as manage your time and to-do lists more efficiently, multitask better, be more organized—don’t and can’t work. They’re only Band-Aids. Instead, you have to retrain your attention. You have to recognize that the underlying issues of mental distraction—all of which are magnified and even harder to control in the workplace—are within your control. Even if you can’t control your environment, you can learn how to reach a more productive mental state of focus, relying on planning, preparation, and technique instead of the frantic efforts people typically use to control their time and attention.

Before you think it can’t be done, look at Tim Armstrong, CEO of AOL, the man responsible for turning that company around. To combat “nano-thinking disease,” he is in the process of testing a policy at AOL he calls “10% Think Time,” which mandates that all executives spend at least four hours a week engaged in an obsolescent activity called *thinking*. Armstrong told me, “It’s been a total game-changer for me and for AOL. The companies that take this seriously will have a major strategic advantage in the years to come.”²

Our current problem, the ongoing mental traffic jam—if not gridlock—in which it’s *always* rush hour, grew out of our most spectacular successes, the amazing inventions that define our era. We created

the labor-saving devices that catalyzed the unplanned explosion within which we live today. But as Armstrong and enlightened managers everywhere are learning, we can learn to manage what we created. When we learn how to take back controls that we've given away, we can get better at managing our attention and not surrendering it to every distraction.

This book will show you how to focus and be more productive at work. In part I, I'll cover the six most common ways in which people surrender their attention at work, and provide targeted solutions for dealing with each one. Then, in part II, I'll provide an overall plan for managing and training your attention over time so that you are more prepared and more mentally fit to deal with whatever distractions come your way.

But first, let me tell you why I am in an excellent position to show you how to overcome today's attention deficit problem.

attention deficit trait

I'm a focus doctor. An MD, now sixty-four years old as I write these words, I've studied attention and productivity for my entire career. "Attention deficit trait," or ADT, is a term I coined in 1994 to describe what I observed at that time to be an increasingly common problem in the modern workplace. Because I am a specialist in attention deficit disorder (ADD), many men and women seek consultation with me, wondering whether they have some form of attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).³ They come to see me because they've lost their ability to focus on anything; they're always in a rush, bouncing from task to task like boats against the current, worried that they're falling behind even as they strive to get ahead. Multitasking, hopping from project to project, e-mailing while talking on the phone, rushing from meeting to meeting, texting under the table, squeezing in one last call while frantically trying to get to the next appointment on time, ending the day with a frustrated feeling of neither fulfilling all of their goals nor performing at their best,

4 driven to distraction at work

let alone with equanimity, these people look *as if* they have true attention deficit disorder, when, in fact, most of the time, they do not. Instead, most of these people have a severe case of modern life—what I came to call attention deficit trait, or ADT.

ADT differs from ADD or ADHD in that it is caused by the context in which it occurs, while true ADD or ADHD are genetic in origin. That means ADT comes and goes: you may have it during the week, but not on weekends or on vacation; or you may have it when you are in a certain work setting or when interacting with some people but not others. Because people develop ADT in an effort to cope with the stresses in their lives, and because the symptoms actually help them in the short term, the symptoms are “sticky” and may solidify into firm habits, even when life slows and becomes less stressful.

As I saw more and more cases of ADT, I wrote about the problem in an article in the *Harvard Business Review* called “Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform.” As I discussed in that article and a subsequent book, *CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap!*, ADT originates externally, like a virus. It then penetrates into a person’s life via the senses and then the brain. It is brought on by the incessant demands, temptations, and opportunities that hijack our attention, filling our heads with a cacophony of mental noise. As our minds fill with such noise—spasmodic synaptic snaps signifying nothing—the brain loses its ability to attend fully and thoughtfully to *anything*.

The symptoms of ADT gradually take over a person. The sufferer doesn’t experience a single crisis. The individual doesn’t say, “It started the day my boss went crazy,” or “It happened the day of the merger,” or even, “It started when I got my iPhone.” Like dementia, the onset of ADT is far more subtle and insidious. The average worker suffers a series of minor annoyances, finds memory more of a problem than ever, notices the workday becoming ever more unpredictable but definitely longer, and finds it harder and harder to keep up. Not aware how profoundly the

circumstances of her life are changing, she does what she always does. She soldiers on. She takes responsibility. She “sucks it up” and doesn’t complain even as her workload morphs into a monster she can’t manage.

For a grim illustration, imagine the anecdote of the boiled frog: if you take that frog and drop it into boiling water, it will try like mad to jump out. But if you put that same frog into a pot of cold water and gradually turn up the heat, you’ll end up with a boiled frog. For most of us, the heat got turned up by the advent of the internet, by the shrinking number of people holding assistant positions, and by the corporate focus on efficiency and productivity, regardless of the human cost.

Fate gave me a catbird seat from which to observe the growing epidemic of ADT that we are experiencing today. I’ve witnessed the vaporization of attention, as if it were boiling away, while people tried valiantly to keep track of more data than even the most adept human brain could possibly accommodate. Since modern life induces ADT, you may wake up in the morning without it, but by 10 a.m. have developed many of the symptoms, which include the following:

- A heightened distractibility and a persistent feeling of being rushed or in a hurry, even when there’s no need to be, combined with a mounting feeling of how superficial your life has become: lots to do, but no depth of thought or feeling.
- An inability to sustain lengthy and full attention to a thought, a conversation, an image, a paragraph, a diagram, a sunset—or anything else, even when you try to.
- A growing tendency toward impatience, boredom, dissatisfaction, restlessness, irritability, frustration, or frenzy, sometimes approaching panic.
- A tendency to hop from task to task, idea to idea, even place to place.

6 driven to distraction at work

- A tendency to make decisions impulsively, rather than reflecting and taking time to think them through.
- An increasing tendency to avoid thinking altogether, as if it were a luxury you don't have time for.
- A tendency to put off difficult work or conversations, coupled with a tendency to overfill your day with feckless busywork.
- A tendency to feel overwhelmed, even when, in reality, you're not.
- Haunting feelings of guilt about incomplete tasks, coupled with resentment that the tasks were imposed in the first place.
- Difficulty in fully enjoying pleasant moments and genuine achievements.
- Too often saying to yourself, "I'm working really hard but I'm not getting to where I want to be," both at work and in relationships.
- A feeling of loss of control over your own life and a nagging feeling of "What am I missing?"
- A recurring thought that "Someday I will make time for what really matters, but I don't have time to do that today."
- A growing, compulsive need for frequent electronic "hits," for example, checking e-mails, speaking on your iPhone, sending or receiving texts, Googling random subjects, visiting favorite websites, or playing games, coupled with almost an addict's yen for them when they are unavailable.
- A tendency to overcommit, make yourself too available, allow too many interruptions, and say yes too quickly.

If you see yourself in many or all of these feelings and tendencies, welcome to modern life. ADT is everywhere, especially at work.

Consider some of the pernicious effects of ADT. It leads you to respond to others in ways you otherwise wouldn't. How often do you find yourself tuning out when someone—say, a colleague or a friend—tells a long, albeit amusing, anecdote or who poignantly pours his or her heart out, while you fake full attention? Sometimes you might hear yourself responding rudely to a person who is trying to explain an important matter to you. How often do you find yourself just saying “Bottom line it” or “Give me the elevator pitch”?

Hyper-speed makes it impossible for you to absorb what's new or different. So instead of finding new material to help you think in unexpected ways, you start thinking in bite-sized, convenient, mundane chunks made up of what's familiar: the stereotypes, slogans, and buzzwords that trigger stock responses and come to define your predictable, prefabricated beliefs, understandings, and convictions.

the price of ADT

As we all know only too well, the problem has grown more pervasive and severe, costing organizations hundreds of billions of dollars every year and individuals their *joie de vivre*, if not sanity itself. The biggest price we pay for surrendering our attention is productivity at work. Estimates of the loss of productivity in the workplace due to screen sucking, time wasted online or in front of a screen, as well as other distractions vary widely, but all are in big numbers. A study published in *Inc.* magazine in 2006 estimated that \$282 billion was lost annually in the United States to screen sucking. (The estimate was based on a study that showed the average worker spent about two hours—1.86 hours, to be exact—of every eight hours at work wasting time, 52 percent of which was spent “surfing the Internet.” The total bill for the wasted time was \$544 billion, 52 percent of which equals \$282 billion.)⁴

8 driven to distraction at work

There is actually a nonprofit organization comprising practitioners, researchers, consultants, and other professionals devoted to the problem of information overload, the Information Overload Research Group (IORG; IORGforum.org). According to its website, information overload wastes 25 percent of information workers' time, costing the US economy alone \$997 billion annually.⁵

These estimates vary greatly, but there can be no doubt that the real number is huge, and the waste of time and money is mostly preventable.

Another more subtle serpent called “multitasking” seduces millions of us into sabotaging our productivity. While most of us believe that we can get more done by doing two things at once, the proven fact—as documented as long ago as 1995 by cognitive psychologists Robert Rogers and Stephen Monsell—is that switching attention from one task to the other in rapid succession, which is what multitasking actually is, reduces accuracy, increases errors, and diminishes the quality of the work, whatever it may be.⁶

Of course, the cost goes deeper than lost productivity. Imagine ADT in an operating room. Consider this e-mail I recently received from a doctor in charge of training surgeons:

I supervise attending urologic and transplant surgeons and am a residency program director and try to articulate and create an environment where good decisions are fostered and made in the course of the surgeons' workday (both in and out of the OR). I found your description of ADT and the brain's “survival mode” to seem to have application to decision making in surgery and in daily medical practice. It is my observation that surgeons in the OR typically are handling multiple inputs (pagers, phones, nurses, anesthesia, pressure from delays in a long schedule etc....) and face considerable distraction while they are doing surgery. This, in my opinion, is a set up for “acute ADT” in the OR. It is particularly a problem when things are not going

as planned or expected in the operation and when the situation demands executive cognitive function, creativity, and mental freshness. It is interesting that with all of the attention directed to making the OR safer, there has been little attention directed to focus on the patient and the operation during the operative event.⁷

As José Ortega y Gasset wrote in a much different time, “Every destiny is dramatic, tragic in its deepest meaning. Whoever has not felt the danger of our times palpitating under his hand, has not really penetrated to the vitals of destiny, he has merely pricked its surface.”⁸ The surface of *our* age has grown vaster and more unavoidable than when Ortega wrote in 1930; we all face far greater risk now of only pricking the surface, missing the vitals of life altogether.

The modern danger is that we grow so engrossed with and seduced by what matters so little, busy with and ruled by whatever presses upon us, that we overlook and thereby destroy our most important projects and goals through neglect.

prescription for focus

Although I never planned to when I was in medical school or residency, over the past thirty-plus years, I’ve turned focus and attention into my specialty, a specialty that didn’t exist when I was in training, but is booming now. If you search for the word “focus” on Amazon.com, you will get 463,374 titles, including Daniel Goleman’s 2013 book, *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*.⁹ While this book gives an excellent account of why focus is important to achieving goals, it doesn’t look at the many ways people lose their ability to focus at work or provide practical solutions for training the attention and regaining control at work.

10 driven to distraction at work

Most people don't see lack of focus as the root of their problem or even as a possibility. Most of those who consult me simply blame themselves for their failure to be happier or more successful. They don't make excuses or blame the system or a difficult boss. "Maybe I'm just a born underachiever," they conclude, or "Maybe I just don't have what it takes to get where I want to get to." They are worried about their jobs, their relationships, and their families, but they only blame themselves in response to the problems they face.

People are usually in more pain than they let on. If they even recognize how much their problem relates to impaired focus, they deal with it simply by trying to overpower it. But that's like trying to cure nearsightedness by squinting harder. Ironically, the harder they try, the more likely they are to fail, which leads them to blame themselves even more, thus intensifying the problem. They don't need to work harder, just smarter.

This book will teach you to work smarter, not harder. First, by recognizing and dealing with the six most common distractions or patterns of ADT at work, and second, by learning a new set of techniques for managing your attention over time, you'll be equipped to overcome whatever distraction is holding you back from doing your best work.

the six most common distractions at work—and how to overcome them

Imagine if you could work with the same kind of focus you did ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago, before the deluge. Imagine if you could repel the tsunami of distractions, interruptions, and sudden changes that buffet you all the time. Imagine if you could control your mind and your work environment so well that you get super-focused often and regularly produce work on a par with your best ever. Imagine coming to work eager to get onto a project, and confident that you'll get it done well. Imagine living without daily frenzy, frustration, fear, and fizzle. Imagine regaining

control over your thinking and emotions, surpassing your best regularly, breaking new ground confidently, and feeling in charge, rather than at the mercy of our unpredictable world. That's exactly what I can help you do.

In part I, I start with the six most common varieties of ADT through which people lose focus at work including one case of true, full-blown ADHD. I show what each syndrome looks like and give practical tools and advice for addressing each. The people I describe in these chapters are composites of the many I've worked with over my thirty years in practice and share the same kinds of high-pressure lives as most of us. They all obey a brave imperative to keep up with everything at work and at home, to pay the bills, to raise the kids, to do it all, or, as Zorba put it, "the full catastrophe."¹⁰

Here are thumbnail sketches of the six syndromes I'll cover in sequence, in chapters 1 through 6.

SCREEN SUCKING: How to Control Your Electronics So They Don't Control You. Our electronic devices, which help us enormously when used properly, have spawned a new kind of addiction in people who feel a high when hyper-focusing on their electronic screens and feel at a loss without them. In this chapter, you'll meet Les, a financial researcher who has lost his ability to think creatively and connect with others, thanks to a screen addiction, driven by deeper feelings of helplessness and loss of control that reach back into his past.

MULTITASKING: How to Say No When You Have More to Do Than Time to Do It. In this chapter I'll paint a picture of Jean, a lawyer who does everything she can to handle an overwhelming load. Facing a daily onslaught of tasks, people like Jean become increasingly and uncharacteristically hurried, curt, peremptory, and unfocused, while trying valiantly to pretend that everything is under control. Jean's problem was amplified by feelings she developed early in life that she needed always to be "good," to do

12 driven to distraction at work

all she was asked to do and more, and to do it all perfectly. No one actually told her she had to be perfect; she put that burden on herself, feeling it was the best way to feel good about herself and about life.

IDEA HOPPING: How to Finish What You Start. The old woman who lived in a shoe, as the nursery rhyme goes, had so many children she didn't know what to do. Like Ashley, whom you will meet in this chapter, some particularly creative, entrepreneurial professionals may have many brainchildren, but they can't sustain their focus long enough to raise any to maturity. In Ashley's case, the issue ran deeper because her competitive mother ridiculed Ashley's childhood achievements, leaving her with a lifelong feeling that to succeed meant to encounter danger and rejection.

WORRYING: How to Turn Toxic Worry into Problem Solving. Many people waste chunks of each day attending to something other than what they want to be attending to, often in response to feelings of anxiety. In this chapter, I'll introduce Jack, a financially successful but incessantly worried executive who carries childhood patterns of fear and anxiety into adulthood in ways that damage his health and prevent him from making the most of his career and having a good relationship with his wife and children.

PLAYING THE HERO: How to Stop Fixing Everyone's Problems—Except Your Own. Like many professionals who sabotage themselves by placing the needs of others above their own, Mary also has a knack for carrying the negative water of the organization. The late professor Peter Frost of the University of British Columbia described such people as heroic toxic handlers who hold the organization together while sacrificing themselves in the process. Mary learned this role early, as a child protecting the rest of the family from a narcissistic tyrant of a father.

DROPPING THE BALL: How to Stop Underachieving at Work. Some people suffer from an undiagnosed condition, true ADHD rather than ADT, which causes them to underachieve through an inability to get organized. Like Sharon, their mental focus is clouded by the external chaos and clutter within which they work—the piles, the scattered papers and other materials, the lists, the journals, memos and other missives, not to mention memorabilia, that accrue every day at home and at work. Sharon’s problem was exacerbated by the fact she’d developed the habit of blaming herself early on in her life, being intensely self-critical and feeling obliged to be good at what she was bad at rather than pursuing the activities she loved and had talent in.

In each chapter, I combine general, practical tips and suggestions with advice rooted in a person’s individual psychology. I try to zero in on the emotions involved, not just peruse the details of the chaos. And I try to leave you with tips and takeaways you can use to combat each one of these syndromes.

training your attention—how to manage and maintain your ability to focus

In part II, chapters 7 through 13, I present the elements of a broad basic plan for managing your attention more generally, with techniques for developing habits to help you consistently find focus and achieve your goals. I provide examples and offer specific tips as the book unfolds. Here are its bones, bared:

ENERGY. You—especially your brain—can’t focus without energy, and plenty of it. As your supply of energy gets low, you

14 driven to distraction at work

start to fade. Taking steps to monitor your brain's energy supply is as basic and essential as keeping your car's tank full of gas. Most people ignore or take for granted this fundamental necessity, as if the supply was infinite, and they do not monitor carefully how they spend their energy, thus wasting great quantities of it on trivial tasks. But when you invest your energy wisely and see to it that energy tank is always full, you become able to feel positive emotion.

EMOTION. Emotion is the on-off switch for learning and for peak performance. Often ignored or taken for granted, your emotional state drives the quality of your focus and thus the results you can achieve. If you work in a fear-driven organization that is low on trust, your performance will necessarily suffer. It's a neurological fact. But if you work in a group that is high on trust and low on fear, then you can achieve at your best. The better you understand yourself, your personal psychology, and your emotional hot buttons, the better able you will be to hold yourself in the right emotional state for focus, while steering clear of the negative states that render sharp focus impossible. Positive emotion, in turn, galvanizes engagement.

ENGAGEMENT. You must be interested in order to pay close attention. You must also be motivated. Interest and motivation equal engagement. Such engagement develops naturally when you work in your "sweet spot," the overlap of three spheres: what you love to do, what you are very good at doing, and what advances the mission of the group or what someone will pay you to do. In addition, there should be some novelty in what you're doing and some room for creative input on your part to hold your attention. Lack of novelty leads to boredom, which leads to loss of focus. But beware, too much novelty and too much creative input will cause you to wander all over and grow confused, which is why you also need structure.

STRUCTURE. Such a simple word, but such a magnificent tool when used creatively and wisely. Armstrong’s “10% Think Time” is a perfect example of structure. Structure refers to how you shape your day, how you spend your time, what boundaries you create, what rules you follow, which assistants you employ, what filing system you use, what hours you keep, what breaks you take, what priorities you set up, which tasks you take on and which you farm out, what plans you make, and what flexibility you create. Without structure, focus is impossible. Chaos reigns. In order to create, preserve, and promote your own best structures, you need to take control.

CONTROL. In today’s world, if you don’t take your time, it will be taken from you. Most people exert less control over how they use their time than they should. Take back control. The fact is, most people give away great gobs of their time and attention every day without meaning to and usually without being aware that they are. They surrender their attention to the onslaught of modern life without putting up much of a fight, as if they were overmatched. No one would dump \$150 into the garbage every day, but most of us flush at least a hundred fifty minutes every day without even noticing we’re doing it.

These five elements—energy, emotion, engagement, structure, and control—combine to create a plan that will allow you to perform at your best without feeling frazzled, frantic, and feckless. As I will show in chapters 7 through 13, you need to individualize your own plan, based on your situation and your own personality and emotional makeup, but the basic elements of this plan will work for everyone.

Each of the six syndromes found in chapters 1 through 6 illustrates one person’s struggle to focus. You will likely see some of yourself in a few,

16 driven to distraction at work

even a bit of yourself in all of them. To help you sort out where you should put most of your efforts, I created an assessment, which can be found at hbr.org/assessments/adt. This will give you a weighted score, showing you which of the syndromes most apply to you. With this knowledge in hand, this book will help you get started on combating the distractions you most commonly deal with and developing your plan to regain focus at work.