

Get Your Time Back!

How to conquer email and other distractions

by Barbara Kay, MA, LPC, RCC



In a recent meeting with a leadership team, the conversation turned to productivity. The top leader looked at me and said something that resonated powerfully. “It feels like our jobs have become doing email,” he said. Everyone in the room nodded their heads in miserable agreement. Next, he asked, “Barbara, is it possible to become ADD?”

Those comments reflect the overwhelming frustration people feel from the constant barrage of email and other distractions. It also reflects the very real perception that we’re intensely busy and unproductive at the same time.

Research by Northwestern and Stanford universities provides clues to this experience. At Northwestern, research has uncovered important brain mechanisms. Everyday task

completion uses one kind of cognition. Creativity and insight arise from a completely different brain activity. Unfortunately, they appear mutually exclusive. You can’t be creative and insightful while your brain is busy with everyday tasks. The “noise” of the day-to-day drowns out the neural networks of creativity. We need to be quiet and unplugged before the brain can deliver creativity and insight.

At Stanford, professors studied the effect of constant media multitasking. They found those who chronically multitask across different media platforms have significantly poorer performance. They were

- unable to focus and were distracted by trivial things in the environment
- unable to recall things correctly and had inferior memory
- much more likely to jump into irrelevant tasks

We have become more distractible and less productive, so now what? Here are seven simple techniques to contain one of the most insidious distractions, email:

Conquering Email

1. **Turn off the spigot.** Unsubscribe to anything you don’t absolutely need. Turn off any LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook automatic update notifications that aren’t important.
2. **Use rules.** Set your email “rules” to send certain emails straight into designated folders. This reduces mail in your inbox and saves time handling every email individually.

For starters, try this with non-essential emails, such as research or news.

3. **Unglue your eyes.** Check email only at specified intervals. For those who must respond quickly, check for five minutes hourly. For those who can check less often, schedule 15-minute periods three or four times per day. Minimize the email window after your time is up and turn off the notification sounds.
4. **Stop the “cc” overload.** Talk with your team and get everyone on board with guidelines for “cc-ing.” Only send what is needed.
5. **Prioritize response time.** Respond to urgent matters during your email window. Delay all others for an end-of-day clean up. Then respond to the remaining and clean out your inbox.
6. **Get help.** Have an assistant set up email rules for you. If possible, let the assistant read and sort your email in a way that saves you from doing everything yourself.
7. **Stay on top.** After you get your inbox cleaned out, stay on top of it daily or at least weekly. If your inbox is completely overflowing, move all of the emails into a folder labeled “inbox.” Go through those bit by bit during your clean up time. It’s likely you can quickly delete much of the old buildup.

Conquering Other Distractions

In addition to taming email, these four simple techniques help create space and time for productive focus:

Isolation islands. Pick a time when you're alert and less likely to be in demand. It might be early morning, the lunch hour or late afternoon. Unplug and isolate yourself during that time. If you can go to a secluded place, even better. Keep it relatively short, so you don't feel too inaccessible, but long enough to get something accomplished.

Closed-door policy. A constant open door invites unending interruptions. Work with those around you to establish windows of time when your door is shut. Keep it consistent so people learn the pattern. Being accessible and responsive is not the same thing as being at the mercy of every whim. Of course, make it known that you want to be interrupted for a true emergency.

Team huddle. Constant interaction among team members means

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somebody is getting interrupted all of the time. Schedule short huddles to trade information and tasks. If you don't want it to drag out, stay standing and use a timer. Use simple tools like folders, trays and task lists to help team members collect and manage the items that need to be addressed during the team huddle.

Focus breaks. Attention research shows that people can only stay completely focused for a limited time (25 to 45 minutes); after that they lose

concentration. Physical movement and a change of activity recharge the concentration batteries. Time the team huddles, closed-door times and other activities so that you have periods of concentration with short intervals of other activities.

People are not productive when constantly bombarded and interrupted while at the same time chained to electronic devices. Taking control and developing some simple disciplines can help professionals and teams be more productive with less frustration. ○

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