9 WAYS TO CREATE TIME, SPACE, AND STILLNESS FOR MEANINGFUL WORK

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I am fascinated by people who do meaningful work. People who create, share and nurture ideas that move us toward a better future. They somehow operate differently, and I am curious to find out how.

Late last year, I decided to start set up interviews with some of these people I could get access to. Some acquaintances, some authors of interesting articles I came across and some people who came highly recommended — spanning from a communications director for an addictions recovery centre, to a web designer and author, to a lead researcher of a multi-year cancer study. Some patterns started emerging. This is one of them.

INPUTS

In a recent study by UC Irvine, researchers attached heart rate monitors to office workers while also monitoring the programs they were using. It was found that people who checked e-mail frequently were consistently in a "high alert" state. They were less productive and experienced more stress, while those whose e-mail was disabled for 5 days had natural, variable heart rates and got more done (source).

Think about that.

That's just e-mail...

In a regular week, the average worker spends about 13 hours checking or dealing with e-mail. (source). Those among us under 35 years of age, spend an average of 4.2 hours a day on social networks, while those over 35 average around 3 hours a day. (source)

Add to that between 250 and 3000+ advertising messages we're exposed daily, phone calls, regular mail, radio programs, music at the gym, dealing with your kids — basically everything that's fighting for your attention and chewing away at it piece by piece — it's clear that our brains are being exposed to a spiralling number of inputs.

And **THAT** is one of the major stumbling blocks preventing us from doing meaningful work. Limiting those inputs can help create the time and space necessary to do work that matters.

MENTAL INPUTS

Even right now, as you are reading this, you may have a few other tabs open on your browser, you may have TV on in the background or you may remember that you have to buy groceries tomorrow.

To do good work, we have to focus. And it's impossible to focus when all those things are swirling around in our brains. Here are some practices I use to limit mental inputs and create focus.

Brain Dump

As you sit down to do whatever needs doing, you may have fragments of ideas, tasks and to-do's in the back of your mind. Dump them out.

Get everything that is currently taking up even a fraction of your attention down on paper. Errands. Groceries. E-mails you have to reply to. Report you have to write. Website design sketch for a new client. New bag you want to buy.

You will notice just by doing this alone, before starting work, you will create breathing room for your mind, allowing you to fully focus.

Monotasking

Our brains are just not meant for multitasking. In fact, as you multitask, your brain literally begins to rewire itself and as a result, sustaining attention becomes impossible. (source)

Don't multitask yourself to becoming a vegetable. Instead, focus on **one task at a time**.

I often struggle with this. Even now, my fingers will float over to the CMD+TAB buttons ready to switch to another application, check e-mail or see what my friends Instagrammed. Here's one solution: Pomodoro Technique.

It's essentially a timer you set yourself to a 20, 25 or 30 minute interval where you do one thing and one thing only. You can learn more about the technique here, and download the free FocusBooster app to try it for yourself. It's weird at first, but I found having a time limit really helps reign your mind in.

Breaking the attention barrier

You may have different experience, but I found that it often takes me about 15 or 20 minutes to really get into a task. It's like a warm-up routine before working out.

After interviewing Paul Jarvis recently, I started a daily writing practice where I sit down and write until there are at least 500 words. Most often it's not award winning content (*not that I won any awards*), but it's raw material. This article came from one of those writing sessions. It sometimes takes 20 minutes, sometimes an hour — but breaking through that attention barrier, where no other thing is floating around in my brain other then what I am writing — is a truly magical moment.

DIGITAL INPUTS

With our laptops, tablets and phones it's SO easy to get distracted! "Just going to check Facebook for a second", "just going to see if anyone Tweeted me" or "*ping*, Oh there's a new e-mail. I should probably check it".

We've given control of our time and attention to apps, e-mail, social media and little white numbers in red bubbles. We've basically trained ourselves to automatically respond to stimuli (a notification) by checking the source, much like Pavlov's dogs in his classical conditioning experiments.

Well, we can't be slaves to notifications if we are to do meaningful work. Here are some ways to limit digital inputs.

Disable notifications

Almost every app, mobile or not, has some kind of a notification system. Either a numeral showing you how many e-mails you're missing, audio ping (Facebook does this with messages) or a pop-up of some sort.

Every notification you receive while trying to focus is like someone putting a cattle prod to your mind. Turn off or disable notifications as much as you can, at least for the period of time you need to concentrate on a task.

Turn off WiFi

Another way to deal with digital distractions and inputs is to simply cut them off at the source. The Internet Connection. I will often turn off the WiFi on my laptop when I work on a marketing strategy, or a new article.

It's simple and effective. Using the Pomodoro technique, you can give yourself a 5 minute window between completing tasks to check e-mail if you really need to.

Patch up black holes

Social Media is like an attention black hole. You just flipped over to the Twitter tab, and next thing you know it's 3:15AM and you're reading about Genghis Khan on Wikipedia. Yes, I help companies with digital marketing, but the fact remains… this can be a major time waster if you're trying to focus.

There are apps that can help, such as ColdTurkey or SelfControl that will block access to certain websites, e-mail servers or even other programs for a period of time. Or you can clean up your browser cookies and never let those websites remember your password, so you have to enter it every time. This little trick worked for me.

ANALOG INPUTS

Outside of the metal and digital inputs, we still have the physical world to deal with. So how do you limit analog inputs?

Analog notifications

I consider the phone (yeah, that one app on the bottom left of your screen) to be an analog notification. Some of the ringtones are truly jarring to my ears, and the bzzzzzz bzzzzzz of the vibration motor is just as bad.

So, I've turned off vibration for both modes (silent and ring) and use a simple ringtone (Signal on the iPhone 5).

When I do work, I'll turn the airplane mode on — effectively stopping all inputs that way. My voicemail greeting promises to get back to the caller within 90 minutes, and so far I may have missed that mark once in 5 years. This gives me a 90 minute interval to focus and do work.

Visual Pollution

Do you have a lot of clutter on your desk? This kind of "visual pollution" plays an interesting trick on our mind. It may create comfort, or it may create an image of "look how busy I am" to your boss, but it's really just a distraction.

Our brain takes in a lot more then we actively process and the more it has to deal with, the harder it is to sustain attention. I look at everything "extra" on my work area as a leak in my attention tank. To plug those leaks, I'll only have handy the items needed for that specific task. Most of the time, it's a client folder, a notebook with ideas and my laptop.

Human interruptions

It can take up to 23 minutes to refocus on a task after being interrupted. (source). Those are some significant losses of time, not to mention a huge drain on your attention tank. So, it's worth looking at how to limit this kind of analog input as well.

Most of the time, I work out of a home office. My wife and I made a deal where if the office door is closed, it means I need to focus on a project — generally she'll let me simmer in there until the Pomodoro app signals a break :)

You may need a sign on your office door, or some kind of signal that indicates "no interruptions please" to your co-workers or co-habitants if you have a home office.

This is not to say we should be anti-social. Rather, we're just asking for a short period of time where we can concentrate without being distracted.

As we experience an ever increasing number of inputs, notifications, distractions and interruptions, it's essential to give yourself the gift of space, time and quiet in order to do meaningful work. I hope this article gave you some ideas on how to do that.

About the Author

I'm an artist, professional speaker, writer, maker, motorcycle rider and marketing strategist. My unique ability is simplifying complex problems, strategizing and charting a way forward. My work has been featured in Mashable, Forbes, GOOD, Social Media Today, Non-profit Quarterly and The Financial Post.

In 2010 I founded a Social Media for Business certificate program at Mount Royal University, and in 2014 I am developing a Digital Marketing certificate for the Canadian Marketing Association. I love working with motivated marketers and entrepreneurs, and even more so in a mentorship or coaching capacity.