

PRODUCTIVITY

Stop Letting Push Notifications Ruin Your Productivity

by Steve Glaveski

MARCH 18, 2019



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Since our prehistoric ancestors used stone tools to start fires and hunt for prey, technology has made



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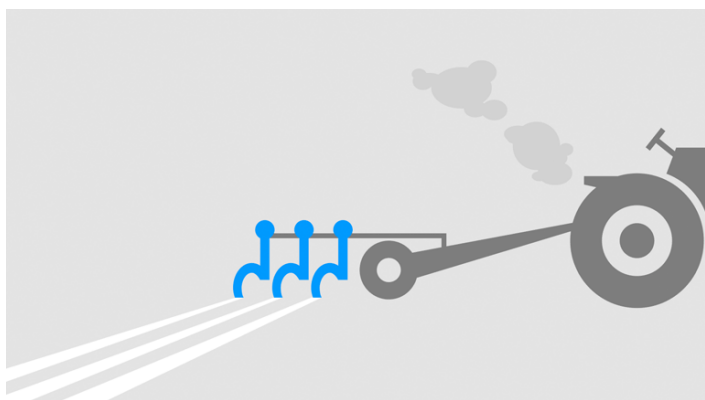
However, any good thing taken to the extreme becomes bad. Aristotle knew this, proposing that to achieve happiness and success, people should cultivate virtues at intermediate levels between deficiencies and excesses. Sleep is good for you. Sleeping for 16 hours, not so much. The Buddha too was a proponent of “the middle path.” In the same way, technology usage left unchecked can also have a devastating effect on our productivity and well-being.

Hungarian-American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, coined the physiological state of “flow” back in 1975, as a state of deep immersion in a single task where the rest of the world seems to just slip away. McKinsey found that when executives are in flow, they are up to five times more productive.

Yet, today’s typical workplace is characterized by the sight and sound of desktop and smartphone notifications, keeping executives in a state of hyper-responsiveness that would make Ivan Pavlov proud. In fact, Facebook’s in-app notifications ring a bell not too dissimilar to the one Pavlov’s many dogs would have salivated at. Push-notifications are sapping our ability to get into flow, to do our best work, and to leave the office feeling truly accomplished. Instead, we’re more likely to leave the office feeling like we’ve worked all day with little to show for it.

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What we call multitasking is, in actuality, task switching, because it’s just not true that we can pay attention to two things simultaneously. After a notification has forced us to switch between tasks, it can take us about 23 minutes to get back to the task at hand, according to a study from University of California, Irvine. When you consider that the average executive touches their phone 2,617 times a day, checks emails 74 times a day and receives 46 smartphone notifications a



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“But notifications help me stay on top of things, and I don’t tap them each time they pop up anyway,” some might argue. Whether you follow a notification or not, your train of thought will inevitably be interrupted by your noticing, processing, and determining whether or not to respond to the notification. Recent estimates find that while each task switch might waste only 1/10th of a second, it can add up to a 40% productivity loss if you do lots of switching in a day. This number might be higher if benchmarked against an executive who spends several hours a day in flow.

And what if you *do* follow that email notification? You visit your inbox, you respond to that email, and while you’re there, you notice and respond to several other emails. You bask in an accomplishment-driven dopamine hit and thirty minutes later, you remember that you were working on a more important and difficult piece of work that’s due by day’s end.

Researchers from the University College London found that humans are hard-wired to follow the path of least resistance, and that our brains trick us into believing that the low-hanging fruit is the ripest. Tim Urban, curator of the incredibly popular Wait But Why blog characterizes this trait as our “Instant Gratification Monkey.” “The monkey thinks only about the present and concerns himself entirely with maximizing the ease and pleasure of the current moment. Why would we ever use a computer for work when the internet is sitting right there waiting to be played with?”

This bias, while making our lives comfortable, and helping us to conserve energy, (which might have been useful when humans were running from predators) compromises our goals; something that product designers at tech platforms know all too well.

A Slot Machine in Our Pockets

As Nir Eyal noted in his book, *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, tech companies are essentially leveraging our psychological vulnerabilities to keep us coming back for more. Eyal writes



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This is why Google's former design ethicist and founder of the Center for Humane Technology, Tristan Harris, has equated carrying a smartphone to walking around with a slot machine in our pockets. We can't resist but take a spin every few minutes.

Not only does this present a significant economic cost for organizations, but the impact on people's mental well-being is arguably worse. Daniel Levitin, professor of behavioral neuroscience at McGill University, says that task switching is exhausting because it uses up oxygenated glucose in the brain, depleting the same energy reserves that are needed to focus on completing a task. All of this weakens the link between hours worked and value created, our motivation subsequently suffers, and we become more anxious as our workload piles up – and more exhausted come day's end.

Be the Master of Your Technology

Like any tool, its usefulness comes down to how you use it. We are capable of achieving so much more with technology as our slave, rather than our master.

A study from London Business School found that in most cases, people choose the default option that they're assigned. Author of *Atomic Habits*, James Clear, says that “the environment you surround yourself with determines the default actions that you take on a day-to-day basis, which is good news, because you can design your environment for success.”

If you'd rather not reach for that bag of Doritos at 9 pm, not having any Doritos in your house goes a long way to achieving the desired outcome. In that same vein, you can be more intentional about the way you design your technology environment. For starters:

- Disable all notifications on both your [desktop and smartphone](#).
 - Turn off your phone or set it to Airplane mode for set periods of time.
 - Use the [Freedom app](#) to block non-mission critical applications (such as social media) for set
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- Use the [Digital Wellbeing app](#) (Android) or [Apple's Screen Time](#) to track your screen time and scare yourself into submission (“I spent how many hours on Twitter yesterday?!”). [Rescue Time](#) will do the same thing for your desktop usage patterns.

In addition to the above, the more you notice and stop yourself from reaching for your smartphone, the more it will become second nature.

Leaders can help their teams by doing the following:

- Communicate the effect of task switching on productivity and mental well-being.
- Practice asynchronous communication in your company (make it okay to not respond to things immediately and instead respond at a time that suits you).
- Encourage or mandate that people turn off all notifications.
- Allow people to schedule windows of two to four hours for deep work.
- Clearly delineate between what is urgent and what's not.
- Create spaces where people can't be physically interrupted (or [encourage remote work](#)).
- Reward team members for less screen time.
- [Hold fewer meetings](#) and limit the duration of meetings.
- Set windows of time for when internal meetings will take place, and windows of time where no meetings should occur.

By being more intentional about our relationship with technology, we can cultivate a work environment in which we are not only more productive, but also more fulfilled and actualized versions of ourselves.

Steve Glaveski is CEO and co-founder of Collective Campus, a corporate innovation and start-up accelerator based



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