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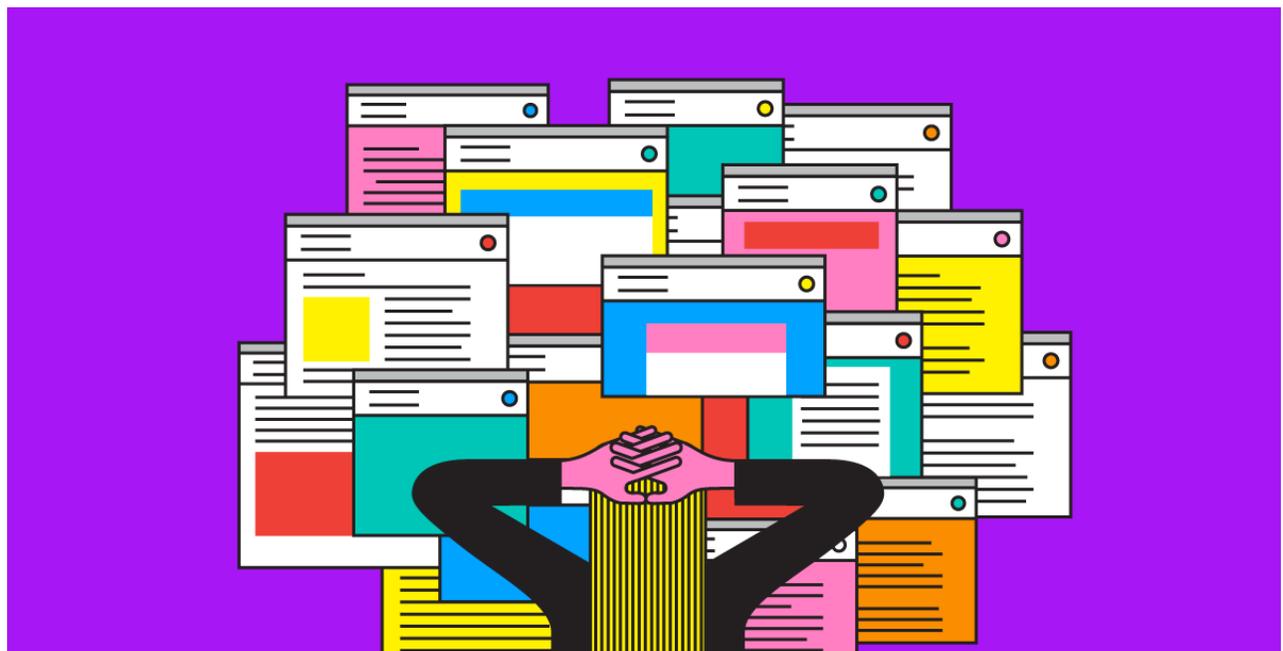
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Managing Yourself

Are You Having Trouble Focusing? These Simple Strategies Will Help

by Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter

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In today's always-on, information-overloaded world, it can be hard to stay focused throughout the day. How often do you find yourself distracted by inner chatter during meetings? Or how often do you find that emails are pulling you away from more important work?

We've surveyed and assessed more than 35,000 leaders from thousands of companies across more than 100 countries, and found that 73% of leaders feel distracted from their current task either "some" or "most" of the time.

We also found that 67% of leaders describe their minds as cluttered, which means they have a lot of thoughts and a lack of clear priorities. As a result, 65% of respondents fail to complete their tasks. The biggest sources of distraction are: demands of other people (26%); competing priorities (25%); general distractions (13%); and too big of a workload (12%). Not surprisingly, 96% of leaders we surveyed said that "enhanced focus" would be valuable or extremely valuable.

While those numbers are alarming, they also represent a massive potential for improved performance and effectiveness. If there is one secret to effectiveness, said leadership pioneer Peter Drucker, it's concentration. In our age of information overload, this is truer now than ever before.

The ability to apply a calm, clear focus to the right tasks — at the right time, in the right way — is the key to exceptional results. Even one second of misplaced focus can mean wasted time or worse missing a key opportunity like a facial cue from a client during a tough negotiation.

One of the CEOs we interviewed, Jean-Francois van Boxmeer of

Heineken, put it this way: “My role does not allow for a lack of focus. I can’t afford to be distracted. I must be on point. I have trained my focus while at work for 15 years, moment-to-moment. I feel the brain is like a muscle, and I exercise it all the time.”

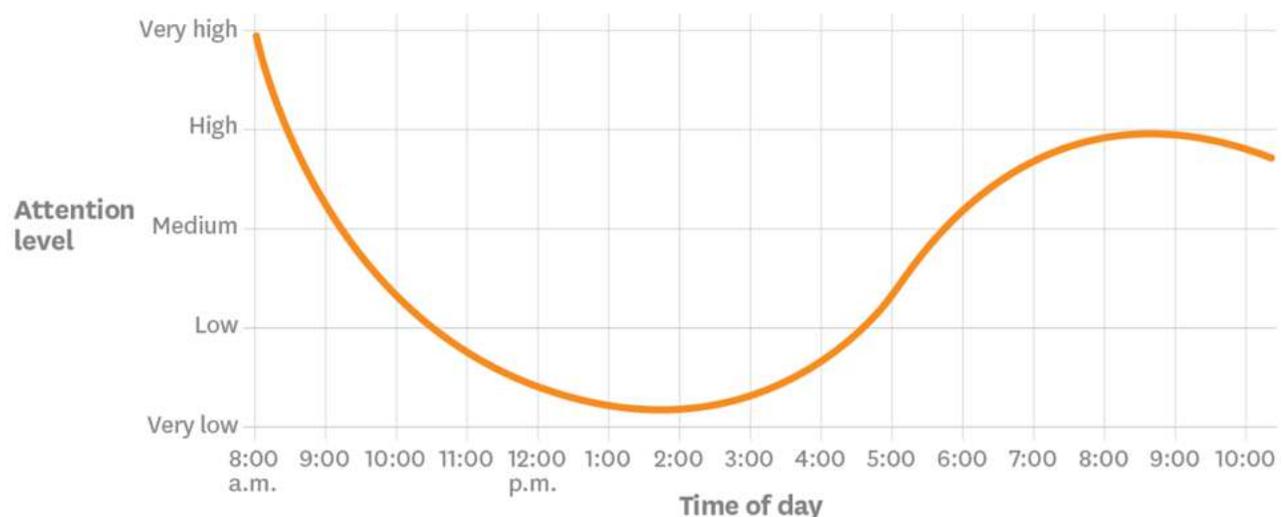
In fact, in our ten years of experience, we have observed a direct correlation between a person’s focus level and their career advancement. Of the thousands of leaders with whom we’ve worked, the vast majority possess an above average ability to focus. This is not to say that exceptional focus is a sure way to the top. But certainly, without focus, career success will be much more difficult to attain. For aspiring leaders, focus should be a daily mantra.

Much has been written about how you can better maintain your focus, and mindfulness practice is obviously the foundation of enhancing focus. But in our research, we looked at some new areas that enable you to manage your focus. Here’s how to do it.

Understand Your Daily Focus Pattern

We looked at how well leaders are able to focus during the day, and found a very clear pattern.

How Our Focus Changes Throughout the Day



The pattern varies slightly from person to person, and understanding this pattern is very useful in understanding how you should plan your day. With this pattern in mind, consider which activities you do at various times of the day. Make sure your most important activities and meetings are planned around the times when your focus is strongest. And that you plan to do more practical and active tasks during the hours where your focus is weaker.

Know What Influences Your Focus

Your focus is very dependent on many physical and mental factors too. Some are good for your focus, others are not.

The most obvious is sleep; if you don't sleep sufficient your focus and judgment suffers. Also, exercise and the types of food we eat, significantly impacts your ability to stay focused.

More surprisingly, coffee, contrary to what many of us believe, is not useful for your focus. The caffeine suppresses your drowsiness, but scatters your focus. Needless to say, alcohol is bad for your focus, too.

Our mental states also impact on our focus. Negative emotions generally decrease it. Paul Ekman, a groundbreaking researcher in emotions from the University of California, San Francisco, described how difficult emotions create a refractory period that narrows your focus on the object of your emotion. In other words, if you get angry, it is hard to focus on anything else than what made you angry. The same goes for desires. Positive emotions generally have the opposite effect, enhancing and opening your focus to see the bigger picture.

Focus is not a zero-sum game. Focus can be trained and planned. And with a bit of effort, your focus can be sustained throughout the day.

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