

Quiet Reflection Over Frenetic Activity

CULTURAL ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER

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With so much competing for our time and attention these days, a growing number of people find it harder to concentrate now than ever before, probably each of us included. It's almost as if across the country we're experiencing attention deficit disorder (ADD) on a cultural level, hence "cultural attention deficit disorder." How did we get to be where we are today?

Following World War II, and at least through the 1970s, it was widely held by time management specialists that the typical office worker earned a full day's pay for 60% of the effort. So, over the course of an eight hour workday, the typical worker actually performed job-related work for 60% of the time, or 4.8 hours. The rest of the time, totaling 40% of the day, was frittered away on daydreams—most often thinking about sex, personal phone calls, coffee breaks, bathroom breaks, extraneous reading and even crossword puzzles! Some studies indicate that, despite all the demands and responsibilities they face, workers today still waste away a sizable chunk of most days.

At the same time, today's career professional faces more to do at work than his or her counterpart of, say, a generation ago. Without offering an involved and wearisome discussion about rising productivity levels, let me simply say that today's career professional, frittering and all, easily beats yesteryear's career professional in terms of getting things done. Today, workers in all types of organizations, including government, non-profit sector groups, health care, and education, as well as private industry devote a slightly higher percentage of their time to the tasks and responsibilities for which they actually were hired, and they have advanced tools that aid them in ways that the workforce ancestry could hardly imagine.

The computer has increased U.S. labor productivity

measured in output per hour, no matter how you cut it. Robert Gordon, author of *Macroeconomics*, reports that labor productivity is now on the order of 10 times what it was when the first electricity plant began operation in 1882. To be sure, intermittently many people goof off at the click of a mouse. Surveys show that non-job related web-surfing and e-mail correspondence is rampant. I mean, who doesn't make personal phone calls or attend to personal business during the workday?

Even with the latest diversions, most workers are making diligent efforts a decent percentage of the time. The higher-level of industriousness among today's workforce may be a sensible reaction to the competitiveness in the workplace, a scarcity of higher paying jobs, or the fear being axed. It could be because they're dedicated, goal oriented, highly ethical, fearful of losing their jobs, or a combination of all the above. Or, it may be a result of improved workplace monitoring techniques. An employer's ability to gauge actual performance levels of employees is at it zenith.

Local area networks rule. So do surveillance cameras. Surveys show that more than 60% of employers monitor employee activities and at least 15% of employers observe employees via hidden camera. Perhaps an underlying element for the increase in productivity across the board is the increase in expectations. As soon as greater technological capabilities come along, BAM! So do expectations. For example, in 1827, the Erie Canal became functional for the passage of horse drawn canal ships—at the blazing speed of four miles per hour.

So many vendors wanted to transport their goods from the West through the Canal, and to the Hudson River down to New York City, that the Canal immediately became clogged. And so, it was enlarged, then again dramatically

enlarged, and then yet again. At every junction expectations about the traffic volume that the Canal could handle rose and then, almost instantly, existing Canal capacity was never enough.

By and by the railroads became popular and for many years the Canal fell into disuse until it became a recreational and tourist attraction in the 20th century. It went from expectation to over expectation to abandonment within a generation. In the typical office, before electric typewriters, and certainly before PCs, getting 25 or 30 original business letters out the door in a day once represented an impressive achievement, all that an employer could expect from a worker in one day.

Today anyone, including some ten year-olds, can generate 500 to 1,000 letters in a day if one chooses, and that wouldn't even be news. On any given day the aggregate of emails sent by individuals, and we're not talking about spam here, is 500 to 600 times greater than the entire aggregation of web pages accessible on the Internet. Enhanced communication technology spawns information overload. In 1905, the typical person generated only a tiny amount of information in his or her entire life. Whereas notable people wrote dozens and dozens of letters, the typical person wrote only a handful.

► Unrelenting Information

Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley in the Department of Information Sciences concluded that if the total amount of unique information annually generated in the world were to be parceled out to every man woman and child on earth, each person would be given a personal library equivalent to 250 books. Information doubles in the world about every 72 days. The Library of Congress catalogues 7,000 new items each day. More than 2,000 new websites go online each day. A minimum of two thousand books are published worldwide each day. All this available information if taking its toll on us.

In 1947, the first year *Books in Print* started collecting data, there were 85,000 titles in existence and 45 publishers listed. Fifty years later, there were almost 50,000 publishing houses in the U.S. alone. So, no matter how competent, organized or clever one may be, virtually all career professionals today find themselves in a daily tidal wave of information, the likes of which are unprecedented. And the unvoiced expectation is that you're supposed to be able to handle it all.

British author and psychologist David Lewis, a Ph.D., says that "having too much information can be as dangerous as having too little. It can lead to a paralysis of analysis, making it harder to find the right solutions or make decisions." No course that you took in college, no article or book, no mentor, no company training session, nothing you've likely experienced thus far in your professional or personal lives has prepared you for functioning smoothly in a world of unrelenting exponential information generation.

► Complexity Everywhere

In every direction, complexity reigns. The inmates have the keys, the cell doors are open, and data as well as choices are running amok. Your everyday supermarket now carries roughly 40,000 items, twice as many as a decade ago. There are so many products, so many brands and subspecies of those brands that no consumer is safe from the bombardment of choice overload. The manufacturers plead *mea culpa*—they are trying to differentiate their products to reach selected niches, a vital and necessary component of survival in the hyper-intense capitalistic jungle.

For example, more than 16 varieties just of Colgate toothpaste, dozens of types of Pantene hair care treatments, 110 varieties of Hallmark greeting cards, and untold numbers of other products just from the same vendor in the same product line are available. A huge variety of product offering doesn't aid consumers. It's insanity. From the array of athletic shoes to bagels to portable CD players to bottled water, we quickly reach a point where mega-choices, like mega-information, do not serve the consumer; they abuse him. It seems everywhere you turn, people seek to complicate things.

When it comes to computers, we sit in front of our keyboards and try take control of our little corner of the world. We mess around with fonts, mouse speed. We tweak and we fiddle. We spend countless hours preparing slides that most people forget in, well, seconds. We generate reports in duplicate and triplicate and then some, that end up serving only one function for most of the recipients—to collect dust. We communicate with staff, impress our bosses, and do our best to stay on top of things, but at the same time, we visit our favorite blogs, comparison shop online, and pass jokes back and forth.

Who hasn't taken chunks of time here and there away from their employer, proceeding all the while as if no one will know the difference? You can rationalize your escapes as long as you get the job done, i.e. who cares if you take a couple of minutes here and there for your own interests? Besides, you're not on the clock, you're a salaried or commission-based employee. Still, if the tables were turned, wouldn't you feel you had a right to know when your employees were actually working versus not?

The bigger the corporation, the more likely the reliance on surveillance so that managers and supervisors can discern on an hour by hour basis, say, how many key strokes a worker has made in preparing a report, how many products were scanned at the register, how many multi megabyte files were downloaded, or how many calls from the field were answered and addressed. Hopefully, you're not among the lot who strays for large blocks of time throughout the day. You have the ability to self-regulate. You recognize that we live in an information overloaded society with too many websites, publications, and electronic media bidding for your attention. Suppose you decide to buck up and get lean and mean. You're "gonna" hack your way through the

tangle of information and communication overload. You strip away anything that smells of excess or encroaches upon your ability to stay on the straight and narrow path to high productivity. You reflexively speed up your routine so that you can get through the day's deluge of emails, open the mail and address it, handle the memos, tend to the faxes, return the phone calls, and still come up smiling.

Today, minutes and even seconds count. Money is not the key currency of life anymore, it's time. In deftly speeding through all that comes your way however, a new kind of problem arises. In your quest to get one thing done after another, your creativity, spontaneity, and joie de vivre diminish. When your brain is always engaged, when your neurons are always firing, when you find yourself in a continual mode of reacting and responding, instead of steering and directing, the best and brightest solutions that you are capable of producing rarely see the light of day.

► C.A.D.D. on the Rise

Like everyone else, you're adopting the same survival mechanisms, galloping along on the same treadmill, and defaulting into the same operational cycles. You're firmly caught in a trap without realizing that you are. If new insights fresh perspectives spring forth, will you, can you, actually act upon them? Do you have any chance of thinking new thoughts or are you simply generating permeations of all your previous thoughts? Since the start of the 1990s, attention deficit disorder has been on the rise, not just among children, but now among the adult population as well. Victims of adult ADD are likely to initiate more tasks and projects than they'll ever finish, get bored easily, seek thrills readily, have a propensity to be late while loathing having to wait, and not be averse to taking foolish risks.

This all too sudden rise of adult ADD, while it may have genetic components, certainly receives a major boost from our kinetic, hyper-speed, information-bombarded society.

In 1965, the typical news sound bite lasted 45 seconds. By the year 2000 it had dropped to 8 seconds. Ad clutter has increased annually since 1985 and has now exceeded the over-whelming level for many viewers. In 2002, every hour of daytime network TV offered nearly 21 minutes of commercials, up from 10 to 12 minutes decades before.

Some cable networks feature 60 seconds of ads for every 140 seconds of programming, equal to 30% of the total broadcast! While the typical TV advertisement was 53 seconds in 1965, by 2000 it had dropped to 25 seconds with 15 second ads as well as 3 second ads peppering viewers at every turn. There is competition for every single moment you have to spare and for those you don't have to spare! When you don't have, or feel you don't have an extra moment to read philosophy, history, or science, when great literature, plays and novels are as foreign to you as hieroglyphics, do you have any chance of seeing your work, career, or life in a new light? You might be doing well in the race but it's the same race essentially down the same track

with the same opponents that may prove to be less than sufficient in enabling you to get those kinds of things done that you want to have completed.

Here's a quick quiz, do you recall these words?: "People never are alone now. We make them hate solitude, and we arrange their lives so that it's almost impossible for them ever to have it." They're from Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*, written in 1932! But they've only recently become haunting in their accuracy. If you're among the rare few who recognize how crucial safeguarding your day and work time has become, the chances are still highly likely that you are not immune to the call of the modern day sirens—the cell phones, pagers, and beepers.

The cell phone has become the most disruptive aspect of work and everyday life. With more than 90% of the teen to senior population now sporting these little gadgets, it's taken as a given that any part of your day is subject to disruption. On a plane, in a meeting, during a presentation, at a business lunch, or yes, in the restroom, some probably well-meaning but otherwise totally boorish soul will whip out his cell phone and engage in public space cell yell.

And the conversations, my goodness, are they inane. If everyone uses a cell phone in the restroom or a lunch or during a meeting and uses it at will, how long will it take before we all go mad? One survey found that when asked to name the invention they hate the most but can't live without, 30 percent of respondents said the cell phone. Second to the cell phone were alarm clocks at 25 percent, followed by television at 23 percent and razors at 14 percent. My, my. I would be utterly embarrassed to have others around me hear my half of what can only be described as pedestrian. "Yes, the elevator has just pulled up to the 16th floor." Do these people have the ability to go for, say, an eight or ten minute stretch without being in contact with someone else? What are they afraid of? Confronting their own thoughts?

► Interruptions Rule the Day

"Cell phone use is not just plain rude, it is mentally distracting and abusive to others" says Paul Radde, Ph.D. author of *Thrival*. And I quote, "Cell phone use captures the brain's interest in completing the conversation, so whether the user is broadcasting or simply within earshot, the Zeigarnik effect kicks in. This is the same desire for closure that makes the effects of multi-tasking akin to the effects of post-traumatic stress."

Mr. Radde says the Zeigarnik effect is characterized by the tendency for people to remember interrupted tasks better than those that have been completed. "Once taken off one task, without completing the transaction," he observes, "the mind continues to seek closure. If you have a number of things going, but none of them to completion, you have these tensions tending toward completion—and that is stress-provoking." It's not that you can't be productive with the use of a cell phone, indeed you can get a lot of things done. However,

the nature of what you tackle is highly skewed.

The man with only a hammer sees everything as nails; likewise the incessant cell phone user accomplishes a variety of tasks, understandably enough, that accrue directly to having a cell phone. And sometimes this get-it-done kind of individual over does this stay-in-touch aspect of what he's trying to accomplish. I mean, how many times can you call a client?

How often do you need to stay in touch with your office. Would every 60 minutes do it, or would 45 minutes be better, or 30 better still? What kinds of new tasks and new responsibilities at work are you creating for yourself and others as a result of the constant communication and, need I say it, over-communication? Too many career professionals are uncomfortable with solitude. Increasingly, this discomfort tolerates only shorter and shorter attention spans. To retreat into one's own mind, to pause, to reflect is now treated as if it were enemy territory!

As the world wide web and interactive media begin to pervade our lives at even higher levels than they do now through the myriad of hand held and miniature devices as well as publicly pervasive audio/video displays, any career professional who wants a quiet, reflective moment is going to have to fight for it. For now, cultural attention deficit disorder is on the rise and more people are falling prey to it.

► Silence Remains Golden

For some strange reason, the higher the level of distraction, as with information overload, the greater we tend to seek it. You certainly can be successful using electronic gadgetry, but beware, the types of things you get done will be of a certain ilk. Whole other realms of accomplishments may be unknown or out of reach for you.

The long-term trends all but guarantee that in the future, the environment all around you will only get noisier. The distractions will come faster, louder and more furiously. So, it's vital to regain or perhaps develop for the first time the ability to take quiet reflection. In doing so, at first, you will feel as if you've been left out of the party, but was it a party you wanted to attend in the first place? Long-term types of accomplishment, grand achievements in our careers—the big stuff—may require going where we haven't gone before, to that place and frame of mind where the best of our thoughts can emerge.

When we learn to value quiet reflection over frenetic activity, the breadth and scope of what we can get done improves remarkably. Silence can be golden, but only if we respect it, know how to harness it, and recognize the gift that it has always provided. ♦