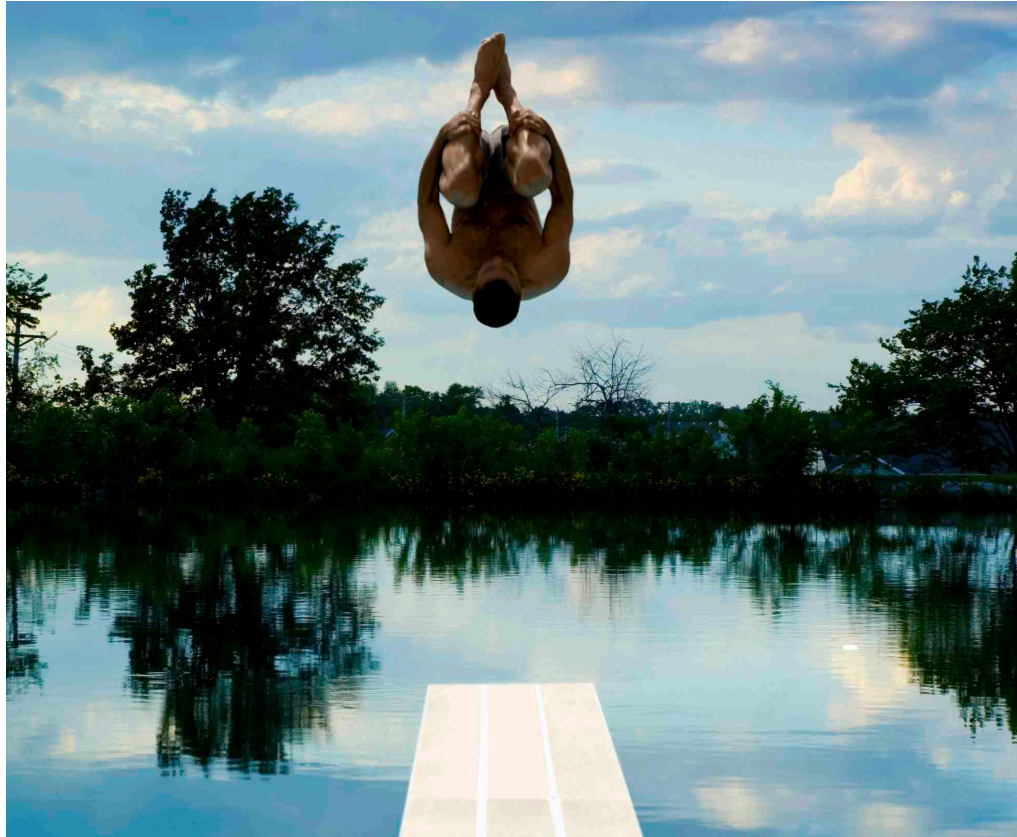


Are You Being Bullied by Your Environment? Getting Control back!

By Dr Adam Fraser

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Dr Adam Fraser is one of Australia's leading researchers, Educators and Thought Leaders in the area of Human Performance!



You're writing a proposal to a client, the email alert goes off and you think, "I will just check it".

Someone wants you to move a meeting. Damn!

You spend the next 10 minutes sorting and co-ordinating calendars.

Back to the proposal! "Where was I? What did I want to say next?"

A few minutes later the phone rings. It's a co-worker ringing to vent about a meeting they just had with a difficult client... 13 minutes go by.

Back to the proposal. Geez. "Bugger I had a great idea for a value add while I was on the phone what was it, I hate it when I cant remember Arghhhhh!!"

Knock at the door! It's HR wanting to discuss the behaviour of a member of your team. 35 minutes later they leave.

"I HAVE TO GET THIS PROPOSAL DONE!!!!!!"

An outlook alert goes off. Meeting in 15 minutes! Damn forgot that one, need to go over the figures they want me to report on.

"Where has the day gone? I will have to finish the proposal at home."

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Does the above sound familiar?

If we were to plot an average hour in your day would it look like this?

Task	Time
Work - Completing tasks	8 mins
Checking Emails	13 mins
Phone call	4 mins
Task Work	5 mins
Checking emails	7 mins
Colleague drops in	23 mins

A serious trend in society is that we are being bullied by our environment. The average employee is interrupted approximately every 6 mins. The fall out is that we rarely get the chance to complete tasks and the solutions is that we have to come in early, stay late or take work home. Other repercussions are that we are losing our ability to focus and concentrate on single tasks. Scientists are now talking about a condition called ADT or Attention Deficit Trait. This is where adult's brains during the day are mimicking a child's brain with ADD. They don't actually have ADD but their brain acts like it does at work, where they can't focus and they start a lot of things but complete very few of them.

The number of people who say, "I spend half a day at home and get more done in that 3 hours than my entire week", amazes me!

Also new research tells us that around 28% of the average persons day is lost due to distractions. Almost a third of a persons day is spent going "Now what was I just doing..."

There are 7 main reasons for this:

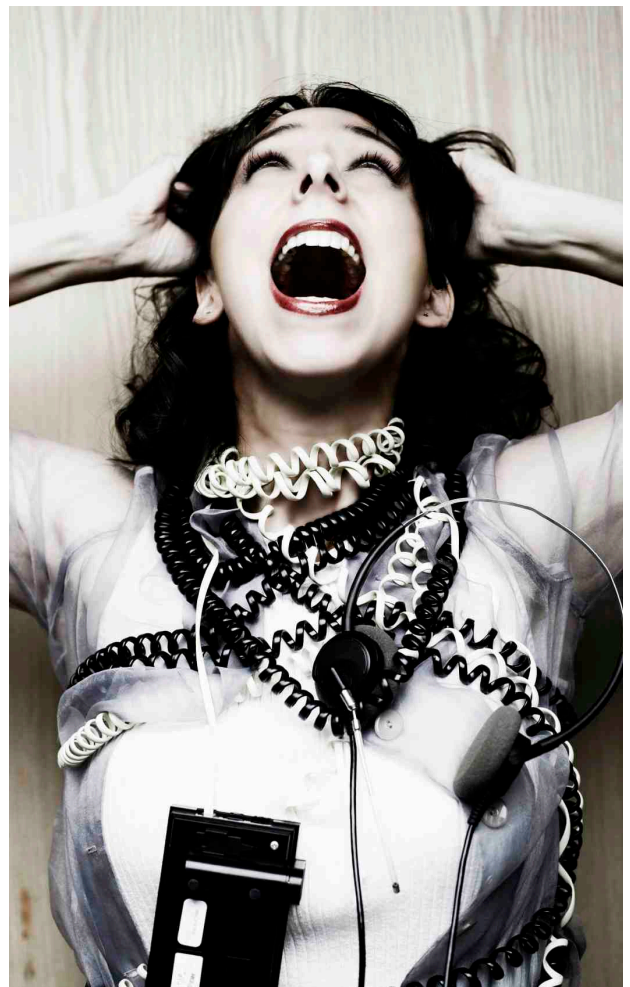
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1. **Gadget Alert:** The introduction of new technology such as blackberries, instant messenger, email and mobile phones, mean that we are easily contacted or better put, easily interrupted.
2. **Space Saver:** The cost of office space has made an open plan office more popular; the result is a lack of privacy and distractions all around us.
3. **Working in a vice:** The world has become condensed. Everyone wants things and they want them now. The business world has developed a sense of urgency about all tasks even the ones that are not important. Everything seems urgent these days and because of that we constantly have to drop everything to suit peoples needs.
4. **Cultural Resistance:** There is an attitude now a days that if you close your office door; or tell people to come back another time; or say for the next 2 hours leave me alone because I'm trying to get something done; you are not a team player and your mean spirited. This attitude drives me crazy. Culture is not built on the fact that you stand around and talk crap for half the day. Also its called Work for a reason!
5. **Time out:** The reality is that many people welcome and look for interruptions because this means that they don't have to work as hard or finish what they are doing.
6. **Brain Snap:** Through destructive habits we have rewired our neural pathways in our brain to be set up so that we are unable to focus for a long period of time. Even when given the

chance to focus we often sabotage this and find something else to distract us.

7. **Multitasking Myth:** For too long people have prided themselves on multitasking. You often hear "You're a champion if you can multi-task" or "To do this role effectively you need to be a multi-tasker". Later on in this paper you will see why multi-tasking is a myth.



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This paper is all about how can we control our environment to be more productive and get things done!

Before we get into how to do this we have to consider two Key things.

You're not Rapunzel: Remember the story of Rapunzel, a woman locked in a tower with no way in or out. Until one day she was rescued by a prince by letting her hair down outside the window and he climbed up. Controlling your environment does not mean that you are shut away from the world never to interact with them again.

Desire for Change: As outlined earlier, many people love distractions as it keeps them less accountable and means they have to finish a reduced number of tasks. In other words it is a safety net. If you have this attitude you need to address this before you can hope to be more productive using any myriad of techniques. You need to want to change.

There are two main areas we need to work on to solve this problem.

Internal Distractions (distractions we create)

External Distractions (distractions around us)

Lets start with the Internal Distractions

Internal Solution 1: Realising that multitasking is a myth!

Multitasking is where you are trying to do more than one thing at the one time. In theory we are saying that we are focusing on two things at the one time. Impossible! The brain cannot focus on two things at the one time, what you are really doing is swap tasking - just swapping your focus from one task to another very quickly.

One condition – we can multi task simple things – as long as one of them doesn't require our attention. For example walking and talking on the phone, we don't actually focus on walking so therefore we can do two things at once. However as soon as walking requires our attention (for example if we get lost and have to think about where we are going) we can no longer continue the conversation.

Swap tasking has been shown to reduce our performance and stress our brain. One study in the UK showed that the cognitive performance of people who had been multi-tasking all day was worse than people who were stoned (been smoking marijuana). Not that I am advocating that at all, it just shows us that how bad swap tasking is for our brain.

Try this exercise get a timer and a blank piece of paper.

Write the sentence:

“Multitasking disengages my brain”

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However the way you write it is, write one letter of the sentence and then below it write the first letter of the alphabet, then write the next letter of the sentence and then the next letter of the alphabet. Keep going writing one letter of the sentence and then another letter of the alphabet. It will look like the following.

M u l t i

A b c d e

Keep going until the sentence is complete and the alphabet is written in full.

Note down the time it takes you.

Repeat the exercise again writing the sentence in full and then the alphabet in full. Do not go from one to the other; just do the sentence and then the alphabet. Note down the time it takes you.

What you will find is that the first method will take you 4 to 5 times longer than the second method.

In the first method you are multitasking it (swapping your focus from one task to the next) while in the second method you are completing one task and then moving onto the next one.

Why does multi-tasking slow us down so much? There are 2 reasons!

1. Attentional Blink!

When we shift our attention from one task to another we get something called an attentional blink. This is where the brain moves into a phase where it cannot take in information or recall information. There are 4 phases in a swap task: re-set, re-call, re-engage and re-focus.

Stage 1: Working on the original task.

Stage 2: Swap - You shift your focus from that task to another.

Stage 3: Reset - Where your brain drops the previous task out of short term memory.

Stage 4: Re-call - Where your brain pulls information out of your long-term memory relating to the new task.

Stage 5: Re-Focus – where you focus on the task and start to do the work.

Stage 6: Re-Engage – Where you start to do some productive work.

Stage 7: Swap - where you change your focus – whole process starts again!

This whole process takes time and slows you down. Basically saying that you are good at multitasking is saying that I am really good at a very inefficient way of doing things.

The second reason!

2. Multi-tasking shuts down the high functioning parts of the brain

As our brain evolved over the years it developed two main distinctions an old primitive part that is driven by emotion, instinct, controls the stress response and helps to protect us from the environment. Then we have a higher level to our brain called the executive centre, which is all around planning, strategy, allows us to be creative, innovative and regulates our behaviour and emotional responses.

When you are in a highly productive state this higher part of the brain is running the show and you are going great. The problem is that when we have a lot of distractions, when we are trying to multi task and when we have too many data points coming at our brain the highly evolved part of the brain gets overwhelmed and sets off a stress response. The old brain recognises this and says, "I have been around longer than you I am taking over." What happens is that the primitive brain takes over and your ability to regulate your behaviour, not to over react, snap at people, be creative, be strategic goes through the floor.

These two reasons are why multi-tasking stresses our brain so much.

Start to move away from doing too many things at once. Can you have a touch it once policy? Some of the most effective people I have worked with start a task and finish it rather than procrastinate, look for a distraction and start another task.

Internal Solution 2 – Manage your Attention

Psychologists have found that the average person is having difficulty controlling their attention during the day. When most people are doing a task their attention starts to wander off and they think about doing other things. The practice of focusing your attention on what ever is in front of you is known as being "Present". Can you practice losing yourself in what ever you are doing? If you are writing a report focus entirely on that report without thinking of the other things you need to do later in the day. Likewise if you are having a conversation with someone totally immerse yourself in that conversation don't let your mind drift.

So often we have conversations and we are not really present. Business is built on relationships; the greatest complement you can give another person is your undivided attention. However, we all have a highly tuned BS detector, and we know when people are not truly engaged with us. Some people believe that being present is the key to team building. Malcolm Gladwell in his book "Blink" examined the determining factor between surgeons that got sued after they made a mistake and those that didn't get sued after a similar mistake. The number one factor was how present the doctor was during the consultation. If a surgeon was present in their interaction with a patient they didn't get sued.



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Being present is also essential for leadership. In a large Telco I am working with the CEO is universally loved by the staff, when asked about the reason for this admiration the most common response was “because when he talks to me I feel important and I know he is actually interested in what I have to say”.

Being Present can also dramatically lower people’s stress levels. Stress is when we doubt our ability to handle a future event; this triggers a stress response, which results in fatigue, negative emotion and poor performance. Craig Hassard from Monash University took a group of medical students in their final year. He measured their stress levels, depression index and anxiety levels. The students then practiced being present at every moment of the day (when studying, spending time with friends and talking to patients) as well as 5 mins of meditation in the morning and night. They retested the students 2 weeks before their final exam (the most stressful time of the year) and found dramatic reductions in stress, depression and anxiety (some of these reduced up to 30%).

A solution to Internal distractions is practicing controlling your attention during the day.

External Solutions to External distractions.

The primary solution external distraction is: start to control your environment.

A great business leader once said to me “A business environment is a piratical environment in terms of time, if you do not have barriers around your time and protect it, you will be abused.” “I have spent my entire career pushing back on my environment so I can work the way I want to work. I control my technology, rather than letting it control me. I communicate to people when I can be present and can’t be interrupted”.

In addition many managers are saying “I come in early to do my work, solve problems or put out fires all day and then I start my work again at 5pm and have to work late”. Or “I spend half a day at home and get more done in that 3 hours than my entire week!”

We need to start to control our environment!

External Solution 1 – Control your technology

Get control over you email, one of the worst things we can do in a day is leave our email open all day. Every time the alert goes off to signal a new message we get distracted and we will often go off and attend to it. This takes us off track and interrupts us.

Phones/blackberries. Instant messaging. Pagers. While all these pieces of technology can be useful and can improve our productivity they often just interrupt us and take over our lives. Recently a woman in one of my workshops told the group that her husband (an investment banker) puts the black berry on the bed while they make love. Apart from sharing too much information with us it illustrated how intrusive these things can be.

Your technology can be turned off! If you are in a responsive job can you check your email or phone every 30 mins rather than constantly. If you are in a less responsive job can you check your email/phone 3 times a day?

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If you are focusing on completing a task can you turn the email and the phone off and just focus on what needs to be done?

Recently in some consulting work I was doing with a company we had the employees start to turn off their technology during the day. They all reported a massive jump in productivity. One thing they did report was how hard it is to do this initially and they realised how addicted to technology they are.

I now get emails and voice mail messages from people outlining when they check their email or phone messages and when people can expect to get a response. A great thing!

External Solution 2: Manage expectations

As I mentioned before in this paper that the world is condensed and everyone expects things straight away. Normal things in business have grown to become emergencies.

To push back on this we need to manage peoples expectations; be very clear about new projects and what time frame they can expect them in. Also communicate to your manager what you are working on, when they give you more work outline to them what you are already working on and ask them to prioritise where this new project fits in terms of priority.

Even with clients everyone is so paranoid to push back and manage expectations with clients, when they ask you to do something be very clear about when they can expect it.

External Solution 3 - Set availability

We can't be available all day every day (this obviously depends on your role, if you are on the front desk, your job is to be available all day every day so this is an exception) its alright to shut your self off and complete a task. The important part with this is setting up a net to catch anything incredibly urgent (these events are rarer than we think) also you need to manage the communication so that people are not offended and so that they know the reason why you are un-contactable. "I really need to get this proposal finished so for the next 90 mins I can't be interrupted, can you take messages for me".

I have seen other people place a stick on clock on the door (one where you move the hands to the time when you are next available) showing what time they are next available.

What if you don't have a door? Other people I have seen get a set of noise reduction headphones and tell people that when I have these on I can't be interrupted. They may only wear them for a total of 2 hours in a day but they help them to get tasks completed.

Other people put auto responders on their email saying I only check my email between 11:30 and 12:00 and 3:30 to 4:00 so if it is urgent please call this number...

Or on their phone voice mail I only check my phone message at the following times if it is urgent send a text message or call...

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External Solution 4 - Chunk down tasks

Start to analyse your job and break it into key tasks. For example if you are in recruitment your key tasks maybe:

Ad writing, interviewing candidates, relationship building with clients, cold calling, marketing calls, business strategy, responding to email and phone messages, reporting to management, etc.

Over the week, schedule when you are going to do these tasks. Break your time into chunks so that I do all my cold calling in one chunk, I sit down for 2 hours and write all my ads for the week, I schedule all my interviews into one afternoon.

The brain likes it when we stay in one mode every time we change the style of work its like changing gears in a car, slows us down. Get in the mindset of a task and stay in that mind set.

Here is a snap shot of a day from one of the most productive people I know:

7:00 – 10:00am	High-level tasks – doing projects or strategy/creative time. No technology; no phone; no meetings.
10:00 – 10:15am	Check emails and phone messages.
10:15 - 11:00am	Return to high-level tasks
11:00 – 1:00pm	Turn technology off and meet with key direct reports
1:00 - 1:30pm	Lunch
1:30 - 2:30pm	Technology stays off and work on projects that are high priority.
2:30 – 4:00pm	Multitasking time – checks all technology and just works on to do list items. Anyone can pop their head in and ask questions during this time.
4:00 – 5:00pm	Meet with direct reports.
5:00 – 5:30pm	Checks technology and responds to any urgent matters
5:30 - 6:00pm	Plans the next day and checks how that fits into the overall strategy.
6:00pm	Goes Home

As you can see they are chunking their day down into single tasks and also controlling technology as to minimise interruptions.

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External Solution 5 - Have a bigger picture.

I once heard a presenter talk about the Anablep fish. This is a fish that lives in the Amazon and it has a set of eyes above the water and a set of eyes below the water. So it can see what can attack it above the water and what can attack it below the surface.

We need to be an Anablep!!

During the day we need to keep our head down and focus on doing tasks and getting work done. However we also need to have a set of eyes above our work and ensure that our activity is getting us closer towards what we are trying to achieve. Another way to look at it is.

Eyes down: doing the work.

Eyes up: where does this activity fit into my overall plan?

Too often we only do eyes down work and not look if we are spending our time on the things that will actually get a result.

To help this write a plan for what you want to achieve in a year

Then using this as a guide, look at what do I need to do in the next month to get me close to that goal. Then break it down to what do I need to achieve in the next week to make that happen. Next step is to get your calendar and schedule when those tasks will happen.

External Solution 6 - Where does my time go?

I recently got a group that I was working with to record where they spent their time over a week. What they discovered is that they were spending most of their time on activities & tasks that had very little importance, and very little time on activities that were core to their role, productivity and made profit for the company. They each said that it was one of the most powerful techniques they had ever done as it showed where their time is really spent.

Go to www.dradamfraser.com - resources and download a ready-made template to start tracking your day.

Each day use this template to write down where each hour of the day goes.

Note: add an "I" next to anything that was an interruption.

Do this for each day of the week.

From your sheets now plot how much time you spend in each part of your job. Create an excel spread sheet in one column adding the fields where your time goes (this will be unique depending on your role and lifestyle), and in the next column is the total time over a week you spent on it. The list may look a little like this:

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Task	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	W/E	Total
Phone calls							
Email							
Drop ins							
Meeting with peers							
Task work completing projects							
Strategy/Planning							
Sales							
Writing proposals							
Meeting with manager							
Interacting with clients							
Admin							
Managing staff							
Meeting with staff							
Interruptions							
Travel							
Sleep							
TV							
Eating							
Parenting							

Task	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thu	Fri	W/E	Total
Partner							
Social/friends							
Exercise							
House hold chores							
Washing/grooming							
Hobbies							

From here start to analyse where you spend too much time and where you spend too little and then develop a strategy to make the changes.

Summary!

We are being bullied and pushed around by our environment. The fall out is that we are losing our ability to focus and also we are getting less done.

There are two types of distractions

Internal Distractions and External Distractions

Keys to control the Internal ones

- Reduce Multi-tasking
- Control your attention and be present

Keys to controlling the External Distractions

- Control your technology
- Manage expectations
- Set availability
- Chunk tasks
- Have a bigger picture
- Find out where your time goes

