

Breaking the Email Addiction

by Tony Schwartz

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Do you wake up in the morning and bring your laptop into bed with you, or check it before you brush your teeth?

Do you check email while you're driving, even though you're four times as likely to have an accident when you do?

Are you answering email on your iPhone or Blackberry when you walk between meetings, or on your way to the parking lot?

Do you keep answering while you're sitting in your car in your driveway or garage when you get home?

Do you bring your laptop back into bed with you at night, and make one final check before you turn out the lights?

Last month my company, The Energy Project, posted a poll on the Huffington Post asking people about their experience in the workplace. One of the questions was about email.

Out of 1200 respondents, some 60 percent said they spend less than two waking hours a day completely disconnected from email. Twenty percent spend less than a half hour disconnected. Email has become our intravenous feeding tube.

I gave a talk recently at a Fortune 100 company about the value of focusing on one thing at a time and the attentional costs of constant interruptions. When I was done, an articulate and ingenuous young man who worked in finance came up to me. “I believe everything you said,” he said, “but I can’t do it. If I get an email, I have to look at it.”

“Have you considered just turning it off at certain times during the day?” I asked.

“I don’t think I can,” he replied. “As soon as I turn it off, I’d start obsessing about what I’m missing.”

It isn’t overload we’re battling anymore, it’s addiction – to action, and information, and connection, but above all to instant gratification.

In the late 1960s, the psychologist Walter Mischel began conducting his famous “marshmallow” experiment. He placed a marshmallow in front of a succession of four-year-olds. Mischel told them they were free to eat the marshmallow simply by ringing a bell after he’d left the room. However, if they were able to wait until he returned, he told them they could have two marshmallows.

Seventy percent of the children gave up in less than a minute. Only thirty percent were able to wait 15 minutes.

Mischel termed marshmallows a “hot stimulus” – meaning highly seductive – not unlike the ping of an email, or a text.

We’re pulled to anything that provides instant gratification, even when we know we’d get a bigger reward for delaying. We’re also quick to respond to any excuse to stop working on something that is difficult and requires high concentration.

What Mischel discovered is that the low delayers quickly burned down their limited reservoir of will and discipline by staring directly (and longingly) at the marshmallow.

The high delayers found something else entirely to focus on. They never looked at the marshmallow.

Mischel came to call this skill “strategic allocation of attention.” It’s a capacity many of us have lost when it comes to the Pavlovian pull of email.

Years later, when Mischel redid the experiment with a new group of 4-year-olds, he decided to teach the poor delayers among them the techniques of the high delayers – very simple ways to redirect their attention away from the marshmallow. Kids who hadn't been able to wait more than a minute rapidly learned to hold out for a full 15 minutes.

We, too, can strategically train our attention. When it comes to email and the Internet, it's critical that we do so to give ourselves more time to think more reflectively, creatively, and deeply in an increasingly complex world.

If you're truly tethered to your email, start small. Choose a specific time each day to turn off your email for a half hour, or an hour, and focus on something that requires your full attention. Then begin adding other times as your focus gets stronger.

Here's one way to start. Take back your lunch. I wrote about this movement on this site last week. Get up from your computer step outside and leave your iPhone or your Blackberry behind. Instead, use the time to quiet your mind, or to think through a difficult problem, or to truly connect with a friend, or a colleague. You'll be building much needed renewal into your day, and you'll also be effectively retraining your attention.

Take back your lunch, and take back your attention. They're two first steps in taking back your life.

Tony Schwartz is president and CEO of The Energy Project. Tony is the author of the June, 2010 HBR article, "The Productivity Paradox: How Sony Pictures Gets More Out of People by Demanding Less," and coauthor, with Catherine McCarthy, of the 2007 HBR article, "Manage Your Energy, Not Your Time." His new book is "The Way We're Working Isn't Working: The Four Forgotten Needs that Energize Great Performance" (Free Press, 2010).



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