

Hey! What's New? 2025-65

Clever Ways to Improve Your Focus at Work

Bryan Strickland writes, in the latest *Journal of Accountancy*, that the cellphones that attendees brought to an AICPA & CIMA ENGAGE 25 conference session on improving focus mimic the brain's response to a slot machine, hundreds of times daily. "Every ring and ping that you receive, our brains have not figured out in the last 30 years that these things are not threats to our survival," he quotes productivity expert and author Marcey Rader as saying. "Every time you get one, you get a dopamine response — the same response that you get from a slot machine. And our brains like it and want more of it."

Those rings and pings may excite the brain, but they also serve to short-circuit productivity at an alarming rate, she added. During Rader's ENGAGE session, *Elevate Your Focus: Defeat Distractions for Peak Performance*, she shared countermeasures that apply technology to boosting your brain.

"Think about what notifications you can turn off on your phone, your watch, your laptop," Rader said. "Could be our email, could be your Teams, could be ESPN, could be The Weather Channel. We often don't need to know that there's a sale at Target right now."

Strickland notes that people tell Rader all the time that they ignore most of their notifications, "but the act of choosing to ignore a notification requires a micro-decision that triggers a dopamine push that adds up to brain drain in the form of decision fatigue."

That fatigue, he points out, "leads the brain to avoid making more decisions, making it difficult at the end of the workday to even pick what you want for dinner while standing in front of a full refrigerator. It affects willpower, making it more likely you'll pick the least nutritious, most easily accessible item."

And during the workday, it interferes with your focus. "For those of you who are worried about your email notifications, in 16 years of teaching this, I've never had anyone turn off their notifications on their email and forget to check it," Rader said.

In the middle of the workday, if Rader remembers that she needs to tell a friend that she plans to bring a cake to the party Saturday, she'll type out the text because she doesn't want to forget. However, she schedules the text to send after 5 p.m. to delay the inevitable exchange about cake flavor and a hundred other things that may pop up.

"Also, if I know that somebody works until a certain time, I'll schedule it for after their work is over. It's not just for me; it's also for them. Think about when you could schedule texts so that you're not distracted by a conversation."

Along the same lines, writes Strickland, "Rader has programmed her iPhone (it works with Androids as well) with "focus zones." During work hours, her phone is set to only receive notifications related to her husband and to receive phone calls from a select group of family members."

"And my phone automatically goes into sleep focus mode at 8 p.m. Because I'm like a child, and I go to bed at 9," Rader said.

“For those of you who use Teams or Slack, a lot of times I hear this: ‘I put it on Do Not Disturb, but people message me anyway. It means nothing,’” Rader said, eliciting head nods around the room. “Try this: Send a status message that says ‘concentrating until 2:30’ or ‘doing deep work until 1 p.m.’ Just that alone will make people pause and say, ‘OK, I’ll contact her later.’”

Rader said that single suggestion positively affected focus for every employee at one of her partner companies — at least for a little while each day.

The article notes that, “if you can’t seem to catch up on email, an underutilized Microsoft Outlook feature (also available as an extension in Google) could grant you the focus to do exactly that. The Work Offline button found underneath the Send/Receive tab in Outlook allows you to read and respond to emails you’ve already received, but it prevents new emails from hitting your inbox until after you click off the feature.”

Rader compared these and other tips she shared to a buffet. “Most people do not eat every single thing on a buffet. I do not expect you to take every single thing that I talked about and put it into practice. Choose one to implement in the next 30 days. I want you to think about that one thing as your guardrail that protects your time, energy and focus, where you are in control of your devices instead of them controlling you.”

Lear more at [Insights from ENGAGE: Clever ways to improve your focus at work.](#)