

One (Task) Is Enough: Why and How to Regain Focus

In the 21st century, information seems to be everywhere and multitasking often is expected or demanded. By trying some strategies and with help from employers and institutions, individuals can regain the capacity to focus.

BY AMBER AULT

If you think people just don't pay attention as they used to, you're correct: Studies of attention span across the most recent quarter-century confirm plummeting human ability to concentrate in the hyperconnected world. A case in point: In 2004, most of us could attend to a computer task for two and a half minutes before shifting our attention away; by 2012, we could stay with it only 75 seconds; and in the last few years, we averaged 47 seconds of focus. The median time to distraction (the most common score, independent of the average) was even worse: 40 seconds. In the current environment, most of us can't focus longer than the time it takes to read this paragraph before we allow ourselves to become distracted. The ubiquity of the tiny computers representative of the information age are the culprits, and our productivity, health, emotional balance, and life satisfaction are the victims.

This is a problem for lawyers.

As knowledge workers, lawyers and judges depend on their facility with comprehending the details: of law, of situations, of histories, of what is happening in conversations. If you cannot follow the plot, your ability to respond adroitly and competently deteriorates.

Hazards of Multitasking

In her 2023 book *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness, and Productivity*,¹ infomatics professor Gloria Mark notes that many of us flatter ourselves into thinking that we are exceptional multitaskers. Unfortunately, it turns out that as a species, we do best when we can focus on one task at a time; anyone with a spouse or child can testify how easy it is to slip into "sort of listening" while we make dinner or drive the car.

While we may think that we can be more efficient if we are constantly checking email during a workday, it turns out that "doing all the things at once," making ourselves constantly available to the needs and demands of various members of our teams, and switching our attention across multiple media extract costs in health and productivity that ultimately outweigh any benefit. Studies of multitasking physicians, nurses, and pilots document the increase in errors among those whose attention spans are shorter due to multitasking. And, not surprisingly, the body keeps the score: when we are responding to multiple demands in short order, our stress hormones and blood pressure both become elevated.

Mark notes that there's a special "switch cost" paid when we quickly cycle through different tasks and demands. Within a few minutes, for example, a lawyer could receive and respond to a message from her paralegal, a call from her



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colleague, and a text from a client, while also checking her bank account, paying her office rent, tracking the latest weather disaster, and reading an email from her child's teacher. With each switch, the cost is greater exhaustion, more effort required to get back on track, and a diminished overall capacity to focus. These effects are amplified when lawyers (and others in their lives) work "outside of" standard business hours – in the evenings, before the office opens, and on the weekends.

Ways to Reclaim Focus

There are strategies for reclaiming capacity to focus. Some of these are already familiar to lawyers with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which appears to be more common among lawyers than the general adult population.² These include:

- Establishing designated times for designated tasks, that is, blocking time

for specific activities;

- Limiting the frequency of checking and responding to email during designated blocks, for example, checking email twice daily;
- Taking breaks from tasks and projects at "natural stopping points" rather than at the moment of interruption;
- Allowing for transition time between different classes of tasks;
- Working with your particular biorhythms;
- Establishing low-distraction work areas;
- Training others on what to expect from you in terms of response time;
- Working to discern the difference between high priority and lower priority tasks;
- Limiting "random" social media scrolling when exhausted, bored, or anxious; and
- Putting devices on grey scale and limiting alarms.

How Employers Can Help

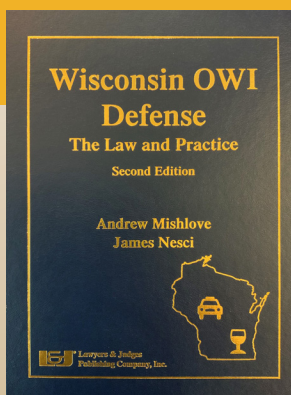
Institutions can support lawyer and staff well-being by implementing policies that prohibit working after hours, encouraging "true" time off, and offering flexibility related to work schedules, comp time, and mental health care. Educating organizational leaders and managers on how multitasking and boundary-less work function as precursors to employee underperformance and attrition, working with idiosyncratic learning and performance styles and needs, and paying attention to employee satisfaction can create environments in which lawyers and staff aren't constantly swimming upstream.

Firms that understand how hyper-responsiveness and counterproductive attention fatigue in employees contribute to burnout and labor force attrition realize the benefits of policies and practices that apply this knowledge for the good of the firm or organization. They enjoy the rewards of a healthier and more loyal workforce less prone to burnout and more able to concentrate on the work of lawyering. **WL**

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ENDNOTES

¹Gloria Mark, *Attention Span: A Ground-breaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness, and Productivity* (Hanover Square Press 2023).

²Hannah Scheidecker, *ADHD in the Legal Profession: The Quiet Struggle*, Bench & Bar of Minnesota, <https://www.mnbar.org/resources/publications/bench-bar/columns/2024/01/26/adhd-in-the-legal-profession-the-quiet-struggle> (last visited Oct. 10, 2024). **WL**

WisLAP Can Help

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