

## FOCUS IN AN AGE OF DISTRACTION

Today I had six full hours of virtual meetings. Some were on Zoom, some WhatsApp, some Microsoft Teams. Others just used standard telephone conferencing. Whatever the technology, the impact was the same: I spent a lot of time sitting at my desk listening, while I wrote in my notebook and stared at my screen or out my office window.

I like to think I'm a good remote worker. After a decade of remote working at Microsoft and nearly five years as an independent consultant, I certainly have many years of practice. As an extrovert, I enjoy connecting with people be it online or face to face. And I know how to get good work done without sitting in one room with my colleagues. At Microsoft I had one manager I never even met - my interviews were all done by phone while he lived in the US and I lived in England. We worked together for nearly six months before he changed roles, never meeting face to face. He was a great manager and we collaborated well.



But we live in an age of distraction - as I sit on a conference call, I can see a pop-up window from the BBC, alerting me that a Coronavirus Briefing is about to begin. I see a notification from Facebook on my PC, letting me know a friend has updated her status. I see the banners, badges and alerts on my mobile reminding me of my next meeting, alerting me to a change in weather, reminding me to check Instagram. And I hear my daughter in the next room taking a French exam over GoogleMeet. The potential for distraction is huge and extends far beyond the sunny sky, my barking dog, the postman at the door and my empty teacup.

So how can we stay focused and present as coaches and leaders with all of these competing data streams flinging themselves at us while we're trying to work?



### 1. Write down all possible distractions:

Before I go into many meetings - but particularly virtual ones - I find it useful to actively set aside all of my distracting thoughts. I do this by writing them down. Take 5 minutes before a meeting and ask yourself what is going on that might stop you from focusing on the coming conversation. List everything you can think of. This isn't a to-do list -- write everything on your mind. For example, I may write that I am distracted by a conversation I just had with a colleague, wondering how my daughter is doing in her exam, or thinking about what

to make for dinner. Once the list is made, physically put it away for the duration of the call. Just the act of writing these distractions down and getting them out of your head - and committing to leaving them behind for the course of your meeting - can help you focus.

## 2. Close all unnecessary applications:

Clearly if we can't see the notifications and popups we're less likely to be tempted to respond to them. While it's obvious, it's not often practiced: turn off any devices you're not using, close email, close applications not in use. If possible, move your phone out of the room. There is some evidence to say [just having a phone on the table next to you](#) is distracting, even if it is face-down and silent. Unless you really need it, remove it from sight.

## 3. Disclose your challenge:

I have worked with a number of colleagues who struggle focus. Sometimes, they mention this challenge before a meeting starts. They say something along the lines of "I am really distracted today, I have had lots of back-to-back meetings." I tried this once - mostly to get some forgiveness for my lack of energy - and found that I was far more engaged for the following hour! Having admitted to everyone I was struggling to focus, I found myself re-committing to the conversation.



## 4. Take notes:

Writing is a great way of increasing focus. If you take notes on the meeting, write the questions you want to ask, or even [doodle](#), it can increase your concentration.

## 5. Use video:

Video isn't always practical, and sometimes it's impossible, but when bandwidth and the tool allow, it can really change the engagement levels of everyone on a virtual meeting. Not only do you feel peer pressure to stay focused and engaged when a camera is on, people can read each others' body language, thus improving the effectiveness of many meetings.



## 6. Schedule in breaks:

Finally, an obvious tip that is often neglected. Instead of scheduling a call or meeting for an hour, schedule it with 45 minutes and use the 15-minute break to walk around, preferably outside. Fill that mug with tea, check your email, maybe even look at Facebook. Deal with some of those distractions you set aside in Step 1. By creating this window of time when you know you can take care of some of these other things, you give yourself more permission

to ignore them the rest of the hour. And if you're coaching and offer these breaks to people during your virtual action learning, they will be more prepared to focus on the work when they come back.

Happy virtual work and happy coaching!

Written by Shannon Banks, MALC, May 2020  
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