Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Unfocused in America

Sylvie · Thursday, November 15th, 2012

Recently, my colleagues and I were asked to offer suggestions for things we would like to see happen in the work place. A routine question that comes up now and then, yes? But one of the top four answers that came back was not-so-routine: One hour of uninterrupted work time.
Really? This zeroes in on something we're all increasingly afflicted by: the diffusion and scattering of our time and our (losing?) battle with concentration.

Believe it or not, focus has become a big concern. Blogger Seth Godin addressed this gracefully. What he had to say caused a bit of stir around my office—a good stir. Here's part of what he wrote:
Before, when your shift was done, you were finished. When the inbox was empty, when the forms were processed, you could stop. Now, of course, there's always one more tweet to make, one more bit of email, one more comment you can respond to. If you want to, you can be never finished…
Which is OK, because, yes, the distractions have multiplied and they are Sisyphean. I'm sure you've noticed how people in airports, waiting rooms and restaurants no longer read or talk (even to one another) but simply stare at their smart phones. It's the new smoking. Have a few minutes to kill? Check messages, answer emails, play a video game.
Occasionally, learn something new.

Easy Procrastination

Before people had social media to distract them, they could kill time by sharpening pencils, organizing their desk, fixing a sandwich, getting that seventh cup of coffee—anything to put off actually having to work. How much easier it has become now to procrastinate anywhere, any time.
This is good news and bad. In the Before we had to spend hours on the phone, write letters that actually needed carbon copies (later machine-made copies) and be posted in a mail box. We needed white-out and erasers. Now with one click we can correct and send 40 letters and avoid 40 separate phone calls. That's progress. I am not being facetious.
What I worry about is the deeper focus that we've lost on the way from Before to Now—in the fragmentation of our increasingly precious hours and our imperiled ability to concentrate. Those are much harder to control than you'd think, because the distractions we're offered are so seductive, so frustratingly unavoidable and have multiplied so exponentially.

'Reply All' Overload

On a recent yesterday, six of us in my company spent 42 minutes on email seeking to determine the spelling of a designer's name. (Another insulting thing the computer does all too well is measure time wasted precisely.) This gentleman wanted his name changed. Now that doesn't

sound very complicated, but it took ten “reply all” exchanges before we straightened out exactly what he wanted it changed to. It was not due to faulty information. No one was to blame. We could not just walk into one another’s pods or offices to resolve the problem; we were too far flung. And yet the spelling this man wanted was just offbeat enough that a few crossed wires and some pesky questions about which letters in the name were to be upper case and which lower (and who got what information when) took all of that time to be sure we all were correct and on the same page going forward—a lot more time than I’ve spent simply telling you about it (which is more than long enough).

In between such scrambles, of course, we still have to deliver some work by some due date, yet you can see how managing time itself has become severely compromised. While we may say that the choice is always there and always ours, the reality is that it takes longer and longer to settle even the simplest issues. Getting real work done has become, against all logic, devilishly difficult.

No End in Sight

And that’s the dance. Facing a sea of infinity, it’s easy to despair, sure that you will never reach dry land, never have that sense of accomplishment, of saying, “I’m done!” (Who was it who said that writers never finish what they write, they simply abandon it?)

As if this were not bewildering enough, there is no question that computers are a writer’s best friend. You never have to scratch anything out, start a fresh copy or—yikes!—cut and paste. The computer does it for you—cleans up your spelling, your grammar, plays around with your paragraphs, even designs them. To be finished, done, complete—isn’t that a bit like being dead?

For the marketer, the freelancer, the entrepreneur, the housewife, the artist, the writer—everybody—the challenge is no longer to be Done but to grow comfortable with the Undone, with the cycle of the Never-Ending. Always leaving something in the box.

The brave new generations seem naturally adapted to this environment. It’s all they’ve known and loved. But does the over 50 crowd live comfortably with this new normal? Not so much. Even the most organized among us, young and old, are stressed by it. Can we ignore the interruptions? Only sometimes. The older generations were trained to finish their homework, their peas and their chores. It is harder for them to accept that they can’t do that any longer.

The Satisfaction of Getting Things Done

As you suspect by now, that’s where I fit in—or don’t. I miss the sense of satisfaction that comes from a finite task. I love deadlines for the same reason. I miss the tactile pleasure that writing anything long-hand gives me. Or I should say gave me. I so rarely do it now. It seems so… cumbersome. My handwriting has suffered greatly as a consequence, because almost the only thing I write by hand now is checks. Yes, I know. I know. How antediluvian is that? But I do it by choice, deliberately, to keep a hand in so to speak; it’s a small, palpable, but absolute task—and I relish both the pleasure of doing it and the sense of completion that having done it gives me.

Optimistically, I offer that we will all eventually adapt to the new Now, even if something inevitably will be lost in that transaction. And it will. But other, as yet unidentified things will be gained. Don’t you think? Probably. We must hope.

It’s a dance, remember? Not a grind and not a death sentence.

And now, if you’ll excuse me, back to email…

Image of labyrinth courtesy Unitarian Universalist Church of Oak Cliff.

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