

Quality Time

By Dana Cogan with Andrea Konuma

When was the last time you took a little break, got away from it all and spent a little quality time with your work?

The amount of time we devote to work is truly impressive, but how much quality do we get with the quantity? If you've ever multi-tasked your way through a long, hectic day juggling priority meetings, urgent emails, unexpected phone calls with another meeting and about a hundred more urgent emails thrown in for good measure, you probably know what I'm getting at. Even if you started the day with a sense of purpose, you probably ended it with a sense of 'Get me out of here, please!'

Recently, noted psychiatrist and author Dr. Edward Hallowell has seen many people who have lots of days like that. He reports a disturbing increase in the number of professionals who come to him for help with a set of symptoms that are almost identical to those of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). He calls the condition ADT (Attention Deficit Trait), and attributes the increase at least partially to the *hyperconnectivity* and *hyperurgency* that permeate most offices. It seems that multi-tasking your way through the day wears down your brain, leaving you frazzled and robbing you of your most valuable resource – the ability to think straight. There are probably some days that do in fact demand a multi-tasking approach; however, a work regimen that is too heavy on quick, shallow, reactive hits may actually be a diet of mental subsistence. (1)

Producing quality work is a high quality experience.

Knowledge workers are paid to solve problems, craft strategies, generate visions and execute plans. We create value with our minds rather than our hands or backs, and we like this kind of work. It gives us a sense that we are adding value by making a unique contribution.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Director of the Quality of Life Research Center and professor at the Drucker School in Claremont, CA, has found that people report the highest quality of experience when they take on challenges that require them to muster and stretch their complex skills and abilities. As we engage in the challenge,

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we become so focused on what we are doing that we lose track of time and may even lose awareness of where we are or what we are doing. He calls this experience *flow* – an extended period of deep focus. We experience *flow* when we read a great book. We also experience it when we throw ourselves into a challenging task or project that we love or consider to be important. (2)

You can probably remember a time when you became so absorbed in some project or task that you lost track of time and your awareness of what was going on around you receded. Once you had built up some momentum (without interruption), you felt a rush of energy or inspiration that propelled you toward your goal. You may have even been pleasantly surprised by the quality of what you had produced when you emerged on the other side of this flurry of focused activity. (Those incoherent all-nighter essays you wrote in college are the exceptions that prove the rule.)

This is precisely what is remarkable about *flow*. It not only increases satisfaction, but also enhances productivity and skills. We experience *flow* when we are stretching our capacities in some way to take on a meaningful challenge. The degree to which we are experiencing *flow* in our work is one indicator of the degree to which we are taking on challenges that enable us to build our skills, thereby increasing our capacity to do even better work and create even more value in the future. The inverse may also be true. If we are not experiencing *flow*, we probably are not doing work that requires us to stretch and grow the capacities we use to create value for our company and customers.

Which brings us back to the question at the beginning of the article.

When was the last time you took a little break, got away from it all and spent a little quality time with your work?

Here's where *hyperconnectivity and hyperurgency* come back into the picture. It would appear that our ability to experience *flow* at work depends on whether or not we periodically stem the incessant tide of incoming mails, requests and meetings long enough to engage deeply and extensively in something that we genuinely consider important or interesting. For most of us, though, it is not easy to

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disengage long enough to focus on one or two truly important things.

Just as we developed multi-tasking skills to cope with the onslaught of inbound tasks that inundate our days, we need strategies to disengage from all those demands so we can engage our minds deeply and use them to add value through analysis and creativity. Anyway, couldn't a few of those urgent emails wait for 2 or 3 hours while you get some quality work done?

So how can you create *flow* in your workplace?

Generate a list of objectives or activities requiring *flow* and create space in your schedule to focus on them exclusively.

Do you block off time in your day when you are able to focus on something you really care about? You can't and shouldn't disengage from others all the time. Being hooked up to the never-ending communication in the workplace can in fact save you time and trouble. Still, how can you think straight if you don't create at least a little space in your day with no phone calls, email or meetings? At the very least take a little quiet time to ask yourself what the really important stuff is and how you are going to make sure it gets done. Research indicates that the brain runs in cycles of approximately 90-120 minutes. Pick one or two 90-minute periods and designate them as *FLOW* time. That should still leave you plenty of time for multi-tasking and meetings.

Manage interruptions wisely.

Research shows that it is much harder to establish *flow* than it is to maintain it once it has been achieved. If you want to experience more *flow* in your day, plan your important, enjoyable activities for a time when you are sure you can build up some momentum before you get interrupted. When I have truly important work, I make a point of waking up and starting it an hour or two before the rest of the house wakes up. Once I've built up a little momentum, I find it is pretty easy to re-engage and re-establish *flow* again later in the day. (3)

Help your subordinates and colleagues create *flow*.

If you are a manager, do you help your subordinates match their

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skills to challenges that will enable them to experience *flow*? Could you integrate discussion of *flow* into your performance and career discussions? Do you give your subordinates and colleagues permission to block off time in their schedules for activities that requiring exclusive focus? Recognize when others are in *flow* and give them the time and space they need to experience and create quality.

Some people may say it is unrealistic to expect to experience *flow* on the job. You get paid for creating quality experiences for someone else, don't you? To this I might reply, fine wine does not come with a 'Born-on' date. Quality time begets quality work. If we are not creating time for quality in our schedules, we're probably operating at less than full capacity and our companies are losing access to the greater part of our potential. Then again, we are probably all so distracted that we may never notice what we're missing.

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- (1) Edward M. Hallowell, *Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform*, Harvard Business Review, January 2005. (Also, Diamond HBR, July 2005)
- (2) Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and Good Business*
- (3) Clive Thompson, *Meet the Life Hackers*, NY Times Magazine (Online), Oct 16, 2005