

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

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The Assault on Creativity: Part Two

Last month's *Insight* explored a dark side of digital communications technology: that with all of its blessings, it's also uniquely powerful at interrupting and distracting us. It prods us to value speed over quality and accuracy. And it promotes information overload, which can shut down the more rational parts of the brain, leaving the emotional centers to dominate our decision-making.

All of this can impair higher-level thought processes, including creativity. The really scary part: advances in neuroscience show that technology-induced behaviors can rewire circuits in our brains so that these negative effects become ingrained.

Will digital media be the death of creativity? Probably not, if only because there's too much demand for it. In an IBM global survey last year, 1500 CEOs ranked creativity the single most important attribute for business leaders.

But creativity may not survive without a fight. If we habitually allow our attention to be fragmented, we're training our brains that way – at the expense of neural circuits that support attention, integration and analysis of complex ideas, and creativity. As neuroscientists say: neurons that fire together, wire together.

Paying Attention to Attention

In a 2009 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Death by Information Overload," Paul Hemp cites a leading attention deficit disorder expert who says the modern workplace promotes ADD symptoms similar to those of genetically based ADD. He also reports on a Hewlett-Packard study in which knowledge workers distracted by email and phone calls lost an average of 10 points on their IQ scores – compared to only 5 points for pot smokers!

How do we protect and nurture our abilities for sustained attention and higher-level thinking? The key is that we have to work at it – we must be conscious of what we're up against and make it a priority to counteract it.

Cognitive neuroscientist Michael Posner of the University of Oregon emphasizes conscious control. "Human beings...can plan ahead, resist distractions, be goal-oriented," he says in a 2008 interview.

Posner and other scientists have shown that the ability to manage attention toward goals can be strengthened through working-memory training. "We have found no ceiling for abilities such as attention," he adds. "The more training...the higher the results."

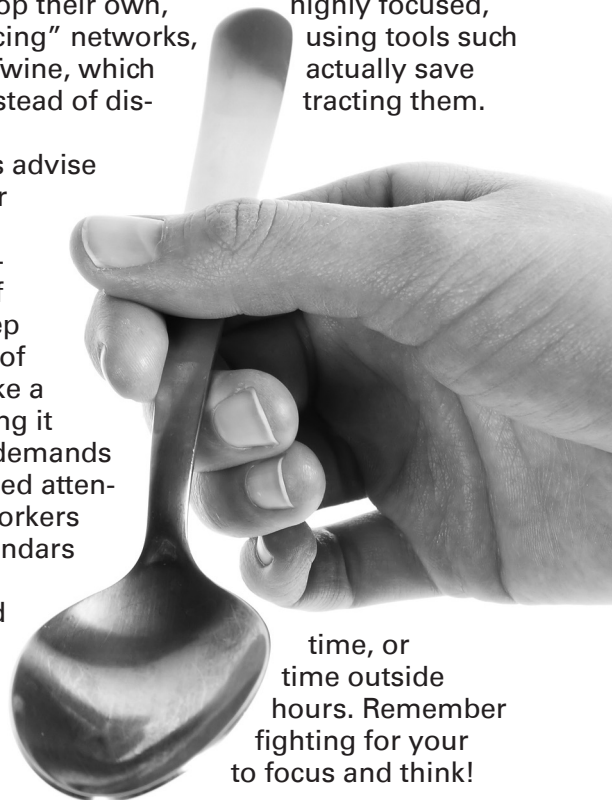
Wrestling the Fire Hose

Hemp says technology, used in a purposeful and directed way, can actually help people cope with the deluge of information. Software tools such as iGoogle aggregate information on specific subjects, giving us one place to check for pertinent news instead of lots of websites and emails. Other tools help sort and prioritize inbox messages. And some people develop their own, "crowd-sourcing" networks, as Twitter or Twine, which help them time instead of dis-

Many experts advise checking your email only at set times during the day. If you must keep it open most of the time, make a habit of closing it when a task demands deep, sustained attention. Many workers use their calendars to carve out uninterrupted blocks of time, or find this of office – you're own ability

highly focused, using tools such actually save tracting them.

time, or time outside hours. Remember fighting for your to focus and think!



And the audio tone that email programs sound when a new message arrives? In a Microsoft study, workers took an average of 24 minutes to return to task after an email interruption. They spent some of this time on other quick tasks, and lost some to distractions. But more than half of the 24 minutes went to simply re-orienting to the original task: "Where was I? What was I thinking?"

Basic organization and time-management skills are indispensable. Keep a good calendar and good lists. Set priorities. And recognize, as researchers have shown, that multi-tasking is usually ineffective. To do something well, focus on it.

"A Lazy Piece of Meat"

To enhance creativity, first do all of the above to open up time for creative thinking.

Study your field and develop in-depth knowledge. Einstein reportedly found the breakthrough solution to his theory of relativity in a dream. But this only happened after he'd spent years struggling toward it through painstaking calculations.

One critical element of creativity, agreed upon by most experts, is changing our environment and shaking up our routines. Gregory Berns, author of the book *Iconoclast*, writes that our brains become efficient by taking shortcuts and categorizing experiences. Well-developed neural circuits become ruts. "The brain is fundamentally a lazy piece of meat," he writes. "It doesn't want to waste energy."

Berns explains that the brain uses the same neural circuits for both perception and imagination. So stimulating perception – with new information, novel experiences, unfamiliar surroundings – stimulates imagination. "Any circum-

stance in which the brain has a hard time predicting what will happen next," he says, will promote creativity.

How about getting in a room to brainstorm with 10 other people? Not so fast. It works much better to combine group work with individual thinking, according to Robert Epstein, author of several books on creativity.


In a 2008 *Scientific American* article, Epstein says dominant people in groups inhibit creative expression. His solution: get the group together for a short time, then shift out of the group to do individual thinking, then come back together. In his experience, these "shifting" teams produce twice as many ideas as teams that stay together.

Falling Spoons, Surreal Visions

Epstein believes the most important creative competency is "capturing" – the ability to hold onto new ideas as they occur to us. (Ever had an idea in the shower, but lost it because you didn't write it down?)

He describes a scientist who had a key idea in his sleep, woke up and did write it down – but in the morning couldn't read his own notes! The next night the idea came back, so he got out of bed and went straight to his lab. The scientist, Otto Loewi, won a Nobel Prize for work based on the idea.

Artist Salvador Dali generated ideas through the hypnagogic state, the phase of consciousness that sets in as we're drifting off to sleep. He would lie on a sofa with one hand holding a spoon balanced on the edge of a glass. As he fell asleep, he would lose his grip and the spoon would fall into the glass, awakening him. He would then capture the surreal images he'd seen on the edge of sleep.

Author Juliet Cameron learned to capture ideas by simply sitting down every morning and writing – three pages in longhand about anything at all, often mundane worries and details of her life. "As I wrote those pages, new ideas began to walk in," she says in the same *Scientific American* article. "You just keep writing. [It allows] you to take risks freely with your ideas." 

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