

KNOWING WHAT TO DO WHEN

BY JAMES LAWRENCE

Introduction

How we use our time, energy and attention is a constant question for those of us who lead. These factors affect our ability to focus, and knowing our rhythms or patterns through a day, week, month, term, or year can help us decide what work to do when.

In his book *Productivity Ninja*, Graham Allcott outlines three levels of attention:

1. **Proactive:** when you have most energy and focus, are at your most creative, and able to tackle the most complex tasks.
2. **Active:** medium levels of energy and focus, and more easily distracted.
3. **Inactive:** still part of your working day, but not able to tackle complex things, and energy is limited.

I actually think it is more than just attention that we need to take into account when discerning what work to do when, and like to describe the combination of elements as a formula.

$$F = E \times T \times (A - (D + I))$$

Where F=Focus, E=Energy, T=Time, A=Attention, D=Distraction and I=Interruption.

Focus is needed for what Cal Newport calls 'deep work'; work that demands the most of us, work that requires we engage with every part of our being to think hard about something, move something on, prepare something. But not all work requires such levels of focus, as Allcott outlines with his proactive through to inactive attention levels.

Let's break down the various components of focus.

Energy

Each of us has an energy flow through the day, it is called our chronotype. I am a morning person. My energy levels are highest in the morning. So, this is the best time for me to do talk preparation, strategic thinking, preparation for a tricky meeting. I take a significant slump in my energy post lunch, recover a bit by 2.30pm through to around 6pm, and then take a long slow decline through to around 10pm when I go into screen saver mode, and 10.15 when I enter power off mode.



Others are exactly the opposite to me. They are at their most energetic in the evening, often through to quite late at night. Mornings are their worst time of the day.

Life is generally geared for morning people not evening people. Schools start at 9am and finish by 4pm, most work places follow a similar pattern through to around 5 or 6pm. So if you are an evening person you can be at somewhat of a disadvantage. However, most church workers have a surprising amount of freedom with how they order their time, and knowing our energy flow can help us identify what to do when. For example, when I worked in a church I went for a run around midday, had lunch and then a 20 minutes snooze. This re-energised me for the afternoon and helped me through my least productive part of the day.

Of course other factors significantly affect our energy: exercise; types of food we eat; drinking enough water; quality and length of sleep; rest and relaxation;

alignment of our strengths, gifts and passions with our work. (See Rangan Chatterjee's Four Pillar Plan for an excellent guide to these things).

Time

You can't give focus to something if you don't have the time to do so. Sounds obvious I know, but without time in the diary to do deep work it simply won't happen. Deep work is normally important but not urgent, so it easily gets squeezed out by more pressing urgent things. Part of the skill of ordering life well is to ensure there is time in the diary for deep work, protected time. If you identify an 'ideal week' you can identify those times in the week to block out for this sort of work. For me that means blocking out mornings for the tasks that require my best energy levels.

Attention, Distraction and Interruptions

In our hyper-connected world, based on a distraction economy, attention is increasingly becoming a lost art. It is hard to be fully present if we are continually distracted by the things around us. But without attention it is hard to focus, to do deep work. Research shows that each time our attention is drawn away from the task in hand it can take up to 23 minutes to fully re-engage with the original task.

To be fully attentive, fully present, we need to deal with distractions (those things from within us that tempt us away from focused work) and handle interruptions (those things from outside ourselves that lead us away from focused work).

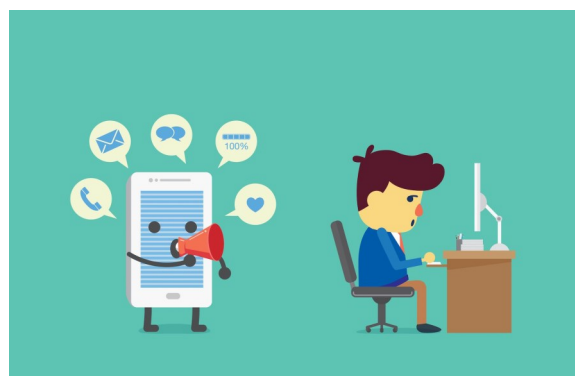
GET RID OF DISTRACTIONS

There are a variety of things we can do to help get rid of distractions.

- **Find a quiet space to work** Many offices are open plan, and therefore can be difficult places to do focused work because of all the distractions going on around us. Finding a quiet space to work, or putting on some headphones to limit the distractions around us will help. Even those who work in their own study/office can still be distracted. Some have separate work areas for different types of work, and their place for focused work is clear of distractions. When they go to that space their body develops a sort of mental muscle memory that associates that space with deep work.
- **Leave your phone away from your deep work space** Our phones are designed to distract us, to draw us into their wonderfully enticing Apps and programmes. Everything from the colour of the buttons to the seductive placing of the ads is designed to keep us clicking and scrolling for more.

So, don't have them around when you want to do deep work. Remove the temptation. And if you can't do that...

- **Turn off notifications** We can do this temporarily by selecting either the do not disturb function on our phone that turns everything off for a set period of time, or by shutting down programmes we don't need open on our computers. (Ultimately it is a good idea to go cold turkey on notifications. Turn them all off and don't have any of them on for a week. Then review what you have missed and those you really need on and only turn those ones back on.) Or...
- **Use an App like Focus or Forest** When you start Forest it begins to build a forest on your phone. If you pick up your phone the forest is cut down. You determine the length of time your forest has to grow, and if you reach a certain number of trees on the App a real tree is planted.
- **Pause your inbox** If, like me, when you are doing deep work you may need to access your emails for some information but then are distracted by those enticing new emails that have landed in your inbox, use a programme like Boomerang which allows you to 'pause' your inbox for a pre-determined amount of time. When the time is complete, all your emails will appear in your inbox.



- **Limit access to websites** Again, you may need access to websites as part of your deep work, but the temptation to be distracted by Facebook or BBC news or whatever your favourite website is can be strong. There are various programmes that enable you to lock yourself out of specific websites ([Freedom](#) seems to be a popular one and works across platforms). [Here](#) is more on how to block these sorts of distractions.
- **Clear clutter** Stuff can be a distraction, not just technology. Our workspace will either help or hinder our ability to keep attentive to the task in hand. There is no one way of doing this, but spend some time thinking through what would be the most helpful way of designing your workspace for maximum attention, everything from the position of

your desk, to the comfort of your chair, to what is or isn't around you.

INTERRUPTIONS

Church leaders work in a role where interruptions often provide wonderful opportunities for serving or blessing another person. I remember at theological college being told 'interruptions are your ministry', and whilst I don't fully go along with that sentiment, I certainly understand it. For that reason conventional wisdom on dealing with interruptions doesn't work so well for those in church roles.

Matt Perman suggests it is best not to aim to minimise interruptions, but rather avoid or embrace them.

- **Avoid** There are times when we need to do focused work and it is best to avoid interruptions completely. Normally this simply involves going to a place where we can be on our own and ensuring those things that can interrupt are placed to one side, which for most of us means the phone. If we work in an open plan office or a more accessible space, then we may need to agree some protocols around when we don't want to be interrupted. This can be as simple as moving to a particular space where we have already let people know we don't want interrupting, or it may be indicating that we are about to do some uninterrupted work, and before we start ask if there is anything we can help with. Agreeing how to indicate we are in 'no interruption' work mode and under what circumstances, if any, we can be interrupted is a relatively simple way of protecting our attention.
- **Embrace** The rest of the time we can extract value from interruptions by seeing them as an opportunity to serve and bless others. Normally

people interrupt because they want something from us, and it is great to be able to lay aside what we are doing in order to lovingly serve someone else, without resentment or frustration. The more we practise the avoiding of interruptions for focused work, the more we will be able to embrace interruptions well the rest of the time.

Focused Work

Focused work, deep work, requires our time, energy and attention to be aligned. We can't sustain this deep work all day every day, and that is why Allcott's chart which suggests different types of work require different levels of focus is so helpful. We can plan our day around these types of work and create a rhythm for our day.

One other factor that can help with this is knowing whether we are introverts or extroverts (used technically to describe whether we draw our energy from being with people or from being on our own). As an extrovert I ideally plan my meetings with people in my mid energy level part of the day, as being with people brings me energy, whereas an introvert may find that they need a higher level of energy for meetings, because being with people tends to drain them somewhat. This does depend on what type of meeting it is, but it can be helpful to reflect on where we gain energy and how this might influence our daily rhythm.

Other tips to help us focus on a tough piece of work:

- **Play some music** Some people hate this, they need quiet for work, but others find music actually helps them focus better. Generally music without words is best, and [FocusatWill](#) and [BrainFM](#) have created

PROACTIVE ATTENTION	ACTIVE ATTENTION	INACTIVE ATTENTION
Key decisions	Day-to-day decisions	Filing
Project planning and reviews	Scheduling the day's work or keeping on top of action lists	Ordering stationery or other online purchases
Important phone calls	Internet research	Printing stuff out
Critical emails	Most email processing	Deleting emails or throwing away paperwork no longer needed
Chairing meetings	Attending meetings	Attending meetings that we don't care about but can't otherwise avoid
Creative thinking, writing, sermon prep, etc.	Preparing rotas, handouts etc., making sure got everything need	Making coffee!

playlists you can use according to what sort of work you are doing (you can also find playlists on Spotify and YouTube; for more on the science behind this see this [article](#)).

- **Choose a different environment** Some like to go to a coffee shop to focus on some deep work, or work in a park.
- **Break your work down into small chunks** The Pomodoro technique is very popular for doing this, 25 minutes of focused work and then a five minute break.

Identifying Rhythms

Just as we have thought about what our daily rhythm might look like it may help to reflect on other rhythms.

WEEKLY

Our energy level will flow through a week as well. I am generally fresher at the start of a week after a day of rest than at the end of the week, so my most challenging work is best done in the early part of the week. I've also thought about the number of delivery events I can sensibly sustain through a week, and how many evening meetings and so on. All this helps me to develop a sense of the (almost) ideal or basic week.

MONTHLY

I find that taking two days of rest once a month is enormously helpful in maintaining my energy levels over a longer period of time. I know some people plan a day a month for reading, or for thinking. Others have a monthly quiet/prayer day.

TERMLY

I tend to work pretty hard, and can do that for around eight weeks or so before needing a longer break. Partly due to having school age kids for so many years I have found the pattern of half term and end of term breaks has worked well for me through the year. I don't have enough holiday allowance to do that every term, but I find in the summer term I am more energised (see below), so don't take the summer half term off, but do deliberately try and slow the pace through that week.

I plan some thinking days each term when I block off several days set aside to think about something in depth. I don't always know what I am going to think about when I put the days in my diary, but I can always find something by the time the days come round.

YEARLY

I am solar powered. I love the sun and warmth. Consequently I find the winter months quite difficult. Knowing this, I plan my most creative projects for the summer period when my energy is high.

I also follow a pattern of six-weekly quiet days through the year that provide me with space to pray in a more spacious way. Others plan a retreat once a year. Some plan a reading week once a year where they go away with a pile of books they have accrued through the year and immerse themselves in a particular topic or range of topics.

Focus

When all these things come together, time, energy, and attention, we are able to do focused work, work that is both demanding and satisfying.

Deep work moves things on. It enables us to think hard about something and work out the best possible way forward. It creates space to consider alternatives to what is currently the norm. It provides an opportunity to gain some wider perspective through some study, research or reading.

Focus rarely comes easily, but with practice, like a muscle, we can develop our ability to do deep work. As we build our capacity for focus, we will be able to get to it more quickly, stay there for longer, and apply ourselves more fully to the task in hand.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Deep Work , Cal Newport (Piatkus)
- How to be a Productivity Ninja, Graham Allcott (Icon Books)