Productivity Improved!

Reclaiming Focus and Attention in Product Design

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Executive Summary

Times have changed since the technology was introduced. Artificial intelligence and social media are constantly rising and improving day by day. Technology is advancing and it doesn't seem like it will. Yet there are downsides to technology's increasing power.

Other industries are being affected by the impacts of technology. An industry that is currently taking hold is product design, a field of graphic design. Technology and product design are interlinked. Product design relies on technology and social media, so whatever affects technology ultimately affects the product design field.

As technology increases, so too do its problems. Social media has become a field of widespread news, distractions, and difficulties. Phones and computers are used for games now rather than work. Society is likelier to go on their phone when bored rather than focus on their work. Now, it has caught up to the product design field. Due to its link to technology, productivity, and focus, product design is decreasing for the product design industry. Results need to be changed, distractions and lack of focus cannot ruin the field.

To recreate a sense of productivity and focus in the field of product design, new techniques in the areas of deep work, focus, and flow must be added to the lives of designers. Being able to resist getting distractions and implement their techniques in a company or work place can allow for better work efficiency and an overall better way to stay focused for long periods.

Introduction

The world of technology is constantly improving. We as a society don't realize how far we have come in the world. We have gone from having to write down information in the form of stories to having multiple interfaces of knowledge on our laptops. We are beginning to use artificial intelligence to create videos, photos, and essays within a single prompt. We can talk to friends and family who live across countries and see them as if they are right in front of us through FaceTime. On social media, you could have hundreds of thousands of strangers following you and being deeply invested in your life. All of this technology is able to impact society on levels we can't even imagine.

Product Design:

A process of making, imagining and the creating of products that solve a users' problem or address specific needs in a given market.

This makes technology an extremely useful tool for different types of industries to utilize. One industry that uses these implementations regularly is product design. Product design is the process of making, creating, and imagining products that solve a user's problem or address specific needs in a given market. Product design is deeply rooted in technology, from different programs to making models, creating websites for your product, and figuring out a user's needs to make a product better. This makes the product design industry rely heavily on technology and all its benefits.

However, multiple challenges have resulted from technology that impacts the product design industry in negative ways: these are the decreasing of focus, attention, and flow.

Focus, attention, and flow are important to how a person focuses on a project/topic, staying invested in your topic, and an overall state of deep focus without any distractions. A society will not be able to function without these because of how much of our lives it impacts. Product design relies on deep focus and attention to not only avoid distractions but also have deep focus and detail on all the stuff designers tend to make for the product. Without these skills, designers in product design will not be able to work at their best leading to problems along the way.

What are Deep Work, Focus & Flow?

Deep work is best defined as the ability to concentrate deeply on a difficult task for prolonged periods without getting distracted. It was coined by Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. This term is very similar to a flow state. Flow State is most often a person's ability to stay so in-focus on a subject that you can stay in that state for hours and hours. It occurs when people find a perfect balance between the task and their current abilities.

Similar to deep work, understanding focus will be understood through *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention and How to Think Deeply Again* by Johann Hari. He goes into detail on how society as a whole has lost its sense of attention how media has been made to steal our focus, and how ultimately we can fix the problem. He goes into multiple chapters about how our attention is important, specifically how attention is used in our favor. Hari says that in Chapter 1, attention allows us to prioritize and focus on a task we find important.
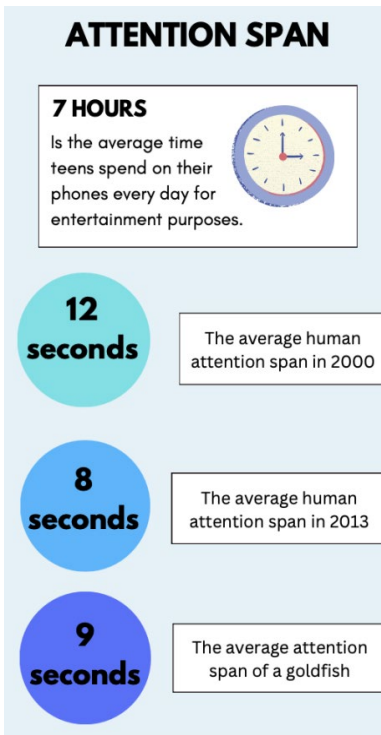
Product design relies on these in a couple of ways:

1. **Deep Work increases focus**. Having a deep sense of focus makes it easier to work for longer times without distractions. This in turn allows for more effective work on a project or design.

2. **Flow States allow for deep concentration**. A flow state can keep a designer in a deep state of concentration, being able to work on a design for long hours on end with ease.

3. **Focus is critical to a good designer**. A designer must have a good attention span, be able to work long periods, and allow more work to be done faster.

These concepts are extremely important for product design. Since technology and product design are very interlinked, one affects the other reputation. If technology causes these problems in flow, attention, and deep work, it will ultimately affect the product design industry. Overall, these problems must be addressed.

Deep Work

The ability to be in a concentrated state on a difficult task for prolonged periods of time without getting distracted.

Flow State:

A flow state is most likely to occur when we find the perfect balance between our current abilities and the difficulty of the activity at hand.

The Problem at Hand

Teenage and Adult Attention Spans

ATTENTION SPAN

7 HOURS
Is the average time teens spend on their phones every day for entertainment purposes.

12 seconds — The average human attention span in 2000

8 seconds — The average human attention span in 2013

9 seconds — The average attention span of a goldfish

https://standard.asl.org/27705/uncate-gorized/social-media-causes-attention-spans-to-drop/
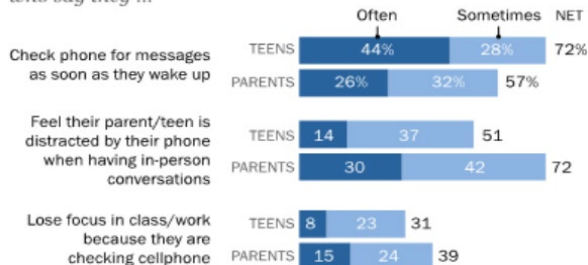
Productivity in product design is inhibited by poor attention spans and loss of deep focus caused by the technology that society uses every day.

Long use of technology affects our attention and focus because it causes distractions to designers' work productivity. One resource used to study this is the Pew Research Center, a research website studying the effects media has on adults. At the bottom of the page, their chart explains that teens/adults spend around half their time either sometimes or quite frequently on their phone while working, waking up, or bored with in-person conversations. Long-term distractions are quite impactful to our attention.

The Pew Research Center also has another chart to the left, which explains that in 2000, the average human span was 12 seconds. In 2015, that average attention spans decreased by 25%, getting to 8 seconds. That is shorter than a goldfish's attention span. There are negative results that come from poor attention spans.

1. **Distractions damage long-term focus**. Most distractions can break flow states and deep work. This is made intentionally. Social media is built around this idea. This is explained in the Chapter 7 of *Stolen Focus* explains this perfectly. "A company's business model can only succeed if they take steps to dominate attention spans of the wider society", meaning social media companies have been made to activate flow state. Social media is designed to show people content they want to see, causing people to stay in these flow/deep work states. As a result, flow states become broken and we get more distracted. This can be hugely impactful to product design, since long hours and designing do not take a short time, it means designers require deep focus on the subject given.

% of U.S. teens/parents who say they ...

	Often	Sometimes	NET
Check phone for messages as soon as they wake up — TEENS	44%	28%	72%
PARENTS	26%	32%	57%
Feel their parent/teen is distracted by their phone when having in-person conversations — TEENS	14	37	51
PARENTS	30	42	72
Lose focus in class/work because they are checking cellphone — TEENS	8	23	31
PARENTS	15	24	39

Note: Parents refer to parents of teens ages 13 to 17. Teens were asked how often the focus in class, whereas parents were asked how often they lose focus at work.
Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 10, 2018.
"How Parents and Teens Navigate Screen Time and Device Distractions"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

2. **Productivity goes down when attention and focus go down.**
Focus and attention are keys to productivity. Being focused for long periods is productive because it means that people can get more done or at the very least have sole focus on a task. If you are losing focus, whether it's a distraction or boredom, it will bring down productivity.

What happens if the problem isn't solved?

If the problem continues rising, there will be consequences for everyone, both in product design and ordinary people. The Center for Humane Technology specializes in talking about the effects that technology will have if it goes left unsolved. They list some of the major impacts that technology will have on the following areas:

1. **Future Generations**: Social media and artificial intelligence are embedded in kids' lives as they use technology for everything from education to socializing. Social media affects attention spans, self-image, and social skills which is leading to increased levels of cyberbullying and depression.

2. **Humanity's Health**: One might think that these effects occur when someone is overusing technology in particular. But even some regular use is detrimental to our mental health. Since media is designed to make people stay and look at content, this long use becomes disruptive and taxing, even if not fully realized.

3. **Democratic Functioning**: Media leads to an overrepresentation of fake news, disinformation, and divisive content. The cumulative impact on our information environment over the past 10+ years has increased polarization, election interference, legislative lockup, and other manipulative practices that undermine democracies worldwide.

Our attention and focus create successful and productive work. Seeing all the effects can be overwhelming. Multiple solutions are needed to fix such a problem.

Getting a Solution

Deep work, Focus, and Flow techniques are the big solutions to this productivity problem. All of these have techniques that have many advantages that make them excellent for product design.

Exploring Deep Work, Flow and Focus

All of the concepts have very unique advantages that make each of them useful for becoming more productive.

Deep work and flow states are used most often to have deep periods of focus. These periods can last anywhere between a few minutes to a couple of hours with no distractions. Being in these deep states of focus allows for more work to be done and to work at a more efficient speed. This becomes extreme for designers because working long periods is a very common practice, so productivity entirely depends on how long they can focus. Asana, a project management site, describes the usefulness that deep work/flow provides in an article to help better its users work:

When you concentrate deeply, your brain cements learning pathways and strengthens the connections between neurons so they can fire faster. That means when you focus intensely on a specific skill, you're rewiring your brain to help you perform that skill more effectively."

Meanwhile, focus is critical to designers. Being able to focus on anything from long hours to attention to individual details, to prototyping, designers have to be able to focus. Being able to concentrate on something can trigger those flow states and deep work. Focus also allows for critical thinking, meaning when a designer is focused on something, they aren't just wandering or slightly bored of what they are doing. More like they are deeply thinking about what they are making, thoughts like "What is the purpose or goal? What is the problem or issue? What is the solution? Does the design need improvements or change?" These questions show in-depth thinking, leaving no room for distractions.

Relevant Case Studies

My Starbucks Idea is a campaign that uses tactics such as focus and flow state. My Starbucks Idea follows a 2008 product design campaign where consumers could submit their ideas for cups, drinks, recommendations, etc. What makes it related to flow states and focus is that this is essentially what Starbucks did to activate those flow states by encouraging consumers to create and focus their talents on making designs for their company.

"These examples demonstrate the value of open innovation. By handing power over to customers, and by giving them a need to focus and participate by recognizing their ideas, Starbucks was able to channel a lot of crowd creativity."

Look below to see a design one of the customers made for the campaign. Imagine how focused the person was when they made this. Look at the details, the lettering, this design didn't happen overnight, they showed a flow state. Imagine what could happen if they did in a professional field like product design, they could have such a huge impact.
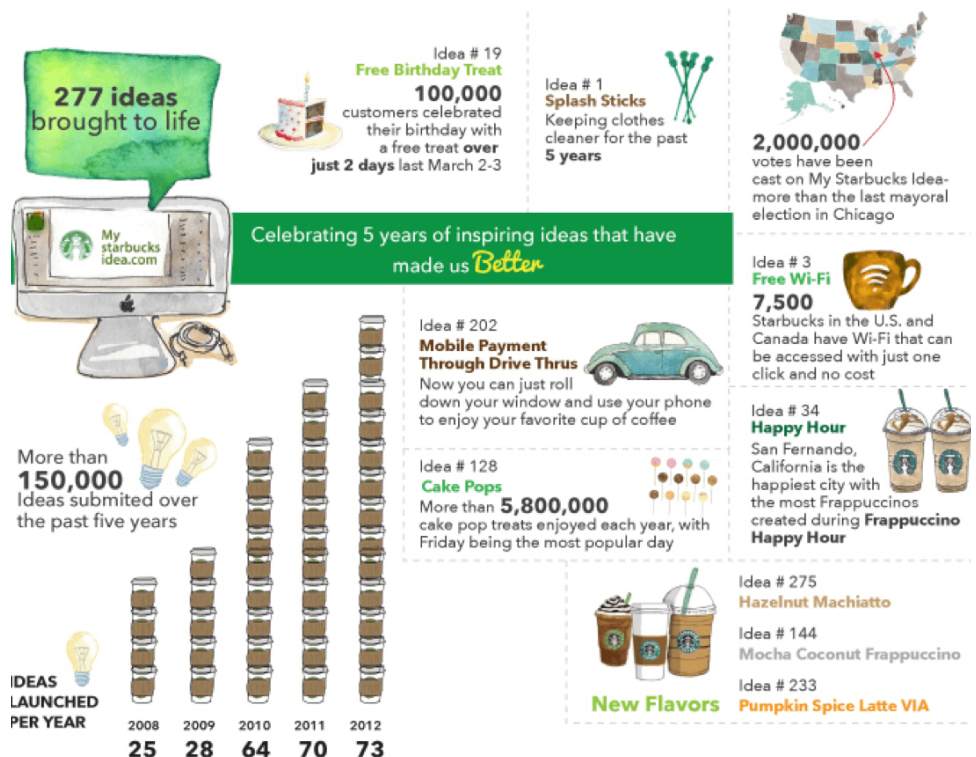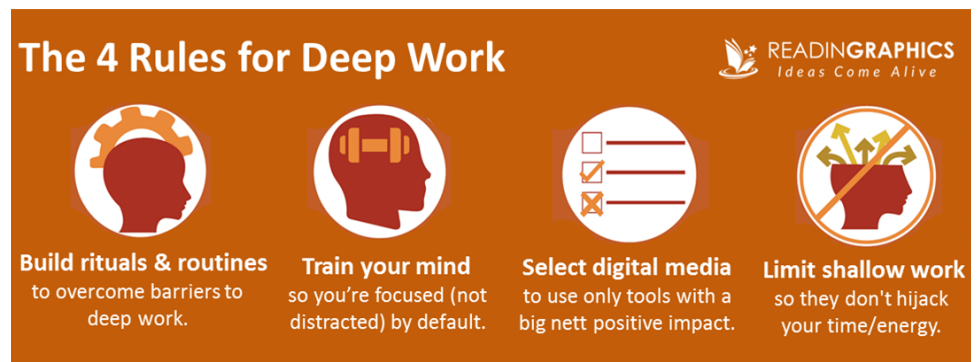

A design by one of the customers at the time.

Implementation

A solution is only a theory until you can implement the technique into a workspace. Having the identified blocks for implementing deep work, focus, and flow, companies and organizations can add these in different ways.

Deep Work Implementation

Deep Work has a very unique set of how it works. Above is a chart of the 4 of implementing deep work into a routine. This is from an article summarizing Cal Newport's *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* explaining Newport's 4 rules of the implementing of deep work into a workspace.

1. **Build Rituals and Routines for Working Deeply**: To overcome any barriers with deep work, building different rituals and routines makes it easier to overcome obstacles and move into states of intense focus. Having a routine while working creates lifelong habits beneficial to the person.

2. **Train your Mind**: Learning to focus on what you are doing at hand only to avoid distractions. Trying to work on more than one thing can be distracting, so having soul focus, gets rid of anything unnecessary to people and workers.

3. **Use Digital Media Selectively**: Network tools can be useful for success and happiness. Newport advocated selecting different tools carefully to use that brings a huge net positive impact on your goals. This makes it easier to figure out what's effective and not.

4. **Limit Shallow Work:** Shallow work is work that isn't fully focused on. The average person only has enough cognitive capacity for about 3 hours of intense deep work a day. The key is to take control of finding a balance between shadow work and deep work.

Focus and Flow Implementation

Flow states require good focus and deep focus is triggered by a flow state. The two often go hand and hand. If one has a problem, so does the other. *Stolen Focus* Chapter 2 goes into detail about different techniques for staying in these deep focus states.

The first thing is having a defined goal. Keep full attention on what ever the goal is. Design a product, create a website, prototype, etc. Multitasking and distraction kill flow, and since flow requires flow concentration, it's better to be one task than 5. Hari believes much work will lead to more distractions because of how unfocused multitasking is.

The second thing, find something meaningful about the goal. Whether it's because the person likes the task or needs to get done, having the task meant to someone gives it a purpose, and you are less likely to be distracted. Giving a task a purpose also feels like a challenge, something needs to be completed or done.

Thirdly, avoid or limit any possible distractions. Muting your phone, limiting notifications. Turn your phone into gray colors. Knowing what gets us distracted helps us understand what will pull us out of deep focus. It could be boredom, or it could be stress, whatever the case, it's good to find ways to manage or limit any distractions to continue having deep focus.

There are a couple of potential challenges, such as if someone may have an underlying disorder like OCD/ADHD or burnout since many designers are required to work long periods with little or no time to plan. However, such issues are either solved through things such as professional help such as therapy or personal help. These factors should also be handled by a boss/leader/company. However, the implements are meant to keep your focus, and still be beneficial because they are overloaded with the tasks (single focus) and allow for scheduled setups (goal-oriented tasks).

Johann Hari:

"when you are trying to make yourself do something that lacks meaning, your attention will often slip and slide off it"

Chapter 2: pg. 56

The Benefits

Deep work, focus, and flow have multiple benefits for designers. For starters, all these tasks and techniques are free to do whenever you want in whatever order fits the person. There are also so many more skills online so if a skill doesn't fit a person, there are more results.

However, the most beneficial aspects of deep work, focus, and flow are that people know the negative signs of technology as well as learning practices in organization/project management. People everywhere are seeing the effects that technology has on their lives. There is a whole documentary based around designers realizing media causes distractions, called the [Social Dilemma](). It's a 2020 documentary based around former designers/workers from companies such as Google and Facebook, sharing their experiences of what it was like working there. One of the most notable quotes is from the co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, Tristan Harris:

"We've moved away from a tools-based technology environment, to an addiction and manipulation-used technology environment. Social media isn't a tool waiting to be used. It has its own goals, and it has its means of pursuing by using your psychology against you."

It showcases that other people within similar industries see the negative consequences that come from technology and this is a good thing. Not only is it showing people actively calling out the problems, but it shows that the people designing our technology know what they are doing, and that they intend to keep people addicted and focused on content in the media.

Content can create and shape what it thinks we want but that doesn't mean that designers have to be suck too. The other major reason that deep work, focus, and flow benefit is gaining the tools to organize our work and focus.

Good organization is helpful to having deep focus because being able to figure out what designers may want to do. Many sites can do organization, notes, or project management. A designer named Anna Lurchenko in her article How to get focused on design work discussed that by using Asana, it allowed her to adopt a "one thing" planning approach:

"This one is inspired by John Zeratsky and his "One Big Thing" practice. An important thing to embrace about focus is that our capacity for focused work is limited. Most people are capable of only 1–4 hours of concentrated work per day. So it is better to use this precious energy on the most important projects first. Usually, I review my inbox, personal planner (I use Asana), project trackers, and calendars, then I write down one big thing and 3–5 smaller things.."

There are other similar project management sites like Asana. One of the other common project management sites is Trello, shown right below. The site can organize sets to help people work on either multiple tasks or one task at a time, allowing for efficient deep work and focus in a specific field or general day-to-day living.

https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/
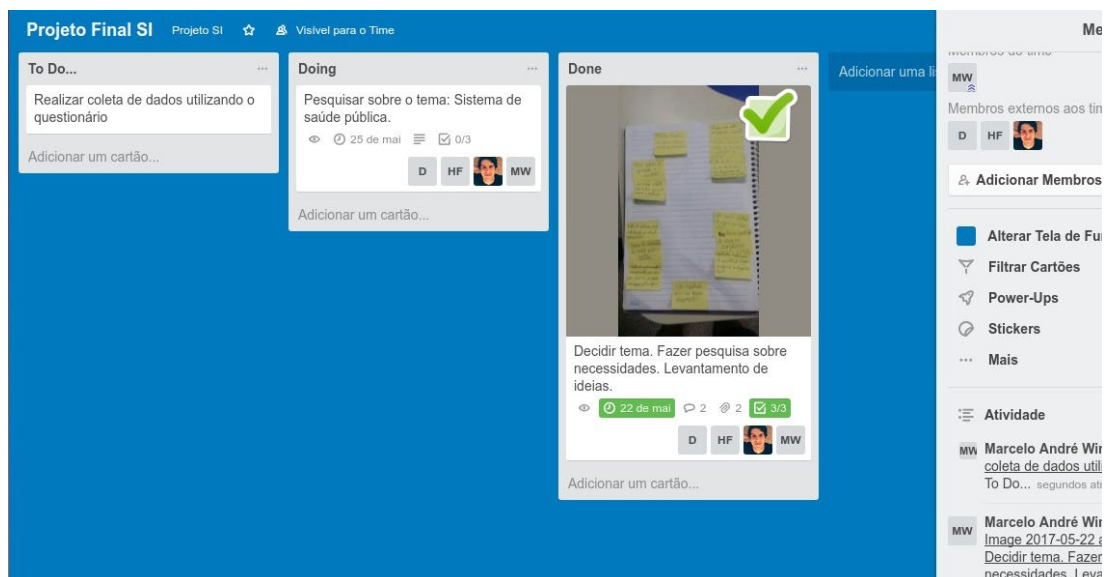
What is Learned

Productivity will always be important to design. It's fundamental to product design and everything it stands for. Having to focus for long periods and keep your attention on a design will make the end goal all the better. These skills of deepwork, flow, and focus are building tools that make the product design industry better, and make productivity there rise.

It's important to understand that being able to focus will not always be easy. It will take time, these skills are learned and implemented over time. A successful goal takes planning and time to fully register to people. Flow, focus, and deep work are talents anyone can practice. They have the potential to make the design industry truly unlike any other.

This shows how technology is a master of wonder. As years and years go on, there is so much potential that technology has now introduced, despite its many flaws. Many advancements will continue to show, and so will product design. The two actively rely on each other, as stated earlier in this document. And yet, product design doesn't have to take the negatives of technology. Many things make deep work and focus important, but with its help, the product design industry is lucky to have such skills and presented here today.

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