

How to Stay Focused While Working From Home

Limit surfing online, define your work space and schedule breaks to help keep your concentration during remote work, experts say



Illustration: Michael Glenwood

By Ray A. Smith

Now that many employees are deep into working from home, and may have to keep doing so indefinitely, some are finding it harder to maintain the intense concentration that kicked in during the early days of forced remote work.

At first, workers were gung ho about working from home, productive in a team-spirit way but also to show they were indispensable in a time when jobs might be more vulnerable. Just 22% of workers had difficulty concentrating back in April, according to a survey of 1,099 workers by the Society for Human Resource Management.

But as that early rush has worn off, and distractions continue to mount, including a summer surge of coronavirus cases, the presidential election, back-to-school concerns and renewed racial unrest, continuing to stay focused has become more challenging.

“Our level of impaired concentration is a result of a combination of stress and our environments right now and the distractions,” said Vaile Wright, senior director of health care innovation at the American Psychological Association. “There is no shortage of distractions for most people right now.”

If you're finding your concentration is flagging, here are some ways experts say you can boost it.

Preempt Distractions

Silence news and other alerts on phones and laptops or minimize news alerts to one trusted source, said organizational psychologist Cathleen Swody. "Some people I know even turn the Wi-Fi off on their laptop and say, 'OK, I'm not turning the Wi-Fi back on until I finish this paper or until I finish this analysis,' so you don't go down the internet rabbit hole and start looking at things, or checking email," she said.

Set Boundaries

Make clear to others in your house when you cannot be disturbed. "Communicate to those in your family: 'Look, when I'm here at this desk, at this table, between here and here, it's a distraction-free zone. You can't come ask me questions,' " said Dr. Wright. Shut the door to the home office or room, if possible, to make the Do Not Disturb message even more clear.

Get Supplies

Tools you can use include white noise machines, noise-canceling headphones, note pads and sticky notes, and caffeine.

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"If there is distracting noise, white noise may help to reduce this distraction," said Kenneth M. Heilman, distinguished professor emeritus in the department of neurology at the University of Florida's College of Medicine. "Our brains have the ability to open and close sensory channels. With the presence of constant white noise, we may not attend to sounds coming into our brain, and thus the presence of this white noise can help to mask other sounds." Noise-canceling headphones, meanwhile, will block noise from others in the house, neighbors or the outdoors.

Notepads and sticky notes can help with reminders or to mark where to resume if you've been momentarily distracted, said Orly Avitzur, president-elect of the American Academy of Neurology.

They are also places to jot down random things that cross your mind. "Whenever those thoughts pop into your head, just write them down and say, 'I'll deal with that later but not right now. For the next 45 minutes, I'm focused on this,' " Dr. Swody said.

Document It

Set down the day's work goals on paper or in digital notes. Block out times with a physical or digital calendar, or in a notebook, to devote to finishing a task. "A popular time people use is 25 minutes, but it could be 45 minutes," said Dr. Swody. "A short block of time to get a particular task done is great for our brains, because they don't feel as tortured."

Schedule Breaks

“Taking breaks is actually a way to improve concentration,” said Dr. Wright. “If we try to force ourselves to stay in focused attention for too long, it doesn’t work.” Schedule time to check email, the news or social media, and for breaks with children, loved ones or even pets.

Know Thyself

Self-awareness counts. “Thinking about things like the time of the day and when you’re best able to either be distraction-free or to focus is critical,” said Dr. Wright. “So if you know, for example, you’re better able to focus on harder tasks in the morning, block that out in your schedule as your thinking time or your writing time. It may be you schedule tasks that require a little bit less concentration or attention in the afternoon, when you’re a little bit more tired.”

Dr. Avitzur added that some people might find a TV on in the background distracting, while others don’t. Similarly, some think listening to music helps them focus, while others think it is distracting. She cited a 2012 study that suggested music without lyrics is preferable to music with lyrics, because if you start thinking about what the lyrics are saying, it’s another form of distraction, she said. “Everyone has to know their strengths, and what makes them maximally productive when it comes to external interference like music.”

Environment Matters

Try to make your environment as work-like as possible, including paying attention to ergonomics. Try to work from a desk or at a table with a proper chair with back support. Working from a couch can cause back and shoulder strain. “Any kind of pain, stiffness or other symptoms is a distraction from being able to perform our work,” said Dr. Avitzur. Consider standing desks, too.

Avoid working from your bed. “You should only associate your bedroom with sleeping and intimacy, otherwise you really run into the risk of sleep disruptions,” which will impact alertness, said Dr. Wright.

Self Care

Make sure you eat, and eat well, and don’t gorge to the point you’ll become sleepy. Make sure you get enough sleep at night, too. “Concentration is a lot easier when we feel well, when we’re not too hungry, not too full, when we’ve had sleep, when we’ve had the right amount of caffeine,” said Dr. Swody. Find time to exercise, too. “Those are all going to help us manage our stress, which is going to help us concentrate,” said Dr. Wright.

Write to Ray A. Smith at ray.smith@wsj.com