

How to break a digital addiction

Having our phones with us means we are always connected, able to squeeze in a few minutes of work during unscheduled downtime. But are smartphones really helping us stay productive?

Recent published studies challenge the idea that being constantly in touch makes us better workers. Checking email, social messages, and stock prices — on average 47 times a day, according to Deloitte's 2017 Global Mobile Consumer Survey: U.S. edition, released in December — may be impeding our ability to get work done. When asked to name what they thought were the biggest productivity killers at work, 55% of employers in a 2016 CareerBuilder study named mobile phones.

While we know picking up the smartphone too often is unhealthy, it may be hard to stop ourselves from checking in. How do we break the habit?





Turn off push notifications. Disable pop-up alerts to stop your phone from interrupting you. Linette George, co-owner and productivity specialist at Spark Productivity, a time management training consultancy, encourages clients to understand how switching tasks becomes a time suck. If it takes a full minute to refocus on work after checking a text message, she calculates, people checking their phones 96 times per workday (every five minutes) spend nearly eight hours per week on what she calls "ramping up and ramping down time." By disabling our phone's ability to nab our attention, we add more focused working hours to the day.

Use a timer to block your usage. George recommends using an app blocker or time tracker such as App Detox or Forest to restrict your smartphone usage. Each app allows you to set rules for engaging with your phone and helps you adhere to them by locking out screens once you've reached your pre-set limits.

Replace smartphone use with something you value. If you feel the urge to check your phone during downtimes, do something else instead. Albright recommends swapping smartphone usage with something that adds value to your life. "If we can replace mindless behavior with something that feels important to us," she says, "that can make such an impact. We notice how much better we feel." The right activity varies by individual, but Albright recommends "anything that gets to who you are as a person," like going for a walk, tackling a to-do list, engaging in some creative work, journaling, or calling someone you haven't spoken to in a while.

Don't take your phone to bed. George recommends charging your phone at night in another room and relying on a landline to wake you in case of emergency. She warns that taking your phone to bed can cut into sleeping hours. "Because the tendency is to use it," she says, "so you're probably staying up later than you should, going down that black hole on Facebook."

Set expectations around email response times. Rethink your belief that people expect you to respond to emails right away. George cites a survey she conducts with clients that asks how soon they expect responses to emails they send as well as how soon they believe other people expect responses. "The answers," George says, "are never in line. Most people don't expect email responses immediately, but think others do." Responding to emails by the end of the day is usually fine.

Albright recommends that professionals set boundaries with clients from the get-go. "What I like to do when I first start working with people is to let them know the hours I respond to emails," she says. You can set these boundaries verbally at a first meeting, or include them in your email signature.

Source: JournalofAccountancy.com

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