Our 47-Second Attention Span With Gloria Mark (S5: EP3) Transcript

🕐 Read 7 minutes

Chris Congdon: Welcome to the Work Better podcast, Gloria.

Gloria Mark: Thank you so much for having me.

CC: I think your research and your book and what you're talking about in terms of attention is more important than ever for people, and I think a lot of our listeners probably wouldn't be surprised to hear that our attention span is shrinking. But what I really found surprising was by how much. Your data says that we can spend about 47 seconds on a screen before we get distracted. And that really threw me because I feel like, oh, I can go longer than that, but maybe I can't. I'd love it if you could talk a little bit about whether we as a species have lost our ability to focus.

GM: Well, let me give a broader context. I've been tracking attention spans on screens over the last 20 years. When we first started measuring this, back in 2004, we found that people averaged two and a half minutes on a screen before switching. In the last, I would say, five or six years, since around 2016, we found that attention spans average 47 seconds on a screen before switching. This was replicated by other people using computer logging techniques. It's objective, unobtrusive measures; it's logging that's going on in the background as people go about doing the normal things they do. We have measured this in the workplace with college students and in their personal lives at home. So, when you say you feel you've gone longer than 47 seconds, first of all, let me point out, this is the average. That means that sometimes people do spend longer, sometimes shorter. The median length of time, which means the midpoint, is 40 seconds.

CC: Wow.

GM: Forty seconds is pretty close to 47 seconds. But it also means that half of all of our observations were less than 40 seconds. So, a lot of the time, people are shifting their attention very, very fast.

CC: Let's talk about that a little bit more because I find it hard to think that I can even learn and take in anything within such a brief period of time. So, the question that I was thinking about earlier was, what does this mean to us as a species, a society? Are we in an era where we're just taking in little micro bits of information?

GM: We are, and if you look around you, you'll see that it's not just our attention on screens. It turns out that shot lengths on film and TV have also decreased over the years. They started out much longer. Now they average about every four seconds, the shot is changing.

CC: Wow.

GM: Film and TV directors and editors are arranging these shot lengths to be very short because they believe that's what people will pay attention to.

The other thing that's happening is that many, if not most people, speed up the rate at which they listen to podcasts, audiobooks, YouTube videos, and they speed it up to 1.5 to two times speed. So what's happening? You can't possibly engage in material in any kind of depth when you're listening to it so fast. What you're doing is you're getting a superficial understanding. You might pick up facts, but you're not allowing yourself the time to deeply process the information. And the same when we're shifting our attention so fast on screens, we're not giving ourselves time to really process the information in a meaningful way.

CC: I don't know that I want to blame anybody. Is it my fault because I'm jumping around? Or is it the fault of people who are creating shows and jumping shots every four seconds? What do you think are the factors that are causing this to happen?

GM: I think there are a lot of things going on. First, tech companies bear some responsibility. I don't think that is the sole reason why our attention spans have shortened. Algorithms have become increasingly more sophisticated. Every time we go on the web, we leave digital traces, and tech companies and ad remarketing companies use this information to create profiles about us. Then they can target notifications and ads, which can help distract our attention. We're also social beings. We're social creatures, and we respond to social dynamics. We check email and Slack and text messaging and pick up phone calls because we care about maintaining social capital with other people, and we're curious. Of course, we want to connect with other people. So, this is also a driver of our short attention spans.

And of course, there's habit. We have developed very deep habits of switching attention. A lot of these habits, as you know, are automatic. If you see your phone next to you, you might automatically pick it up and swipe it open. You might automatically check your email or news or social media. So we have a lot of these habits that we've developed that affect our ability to spend long periods of time in attention.

And of course, there are personality differences. We are unique beings. People who have the personality trait of neuroticism tend to replay events over and over in their minds, and they have shorter attention spans than other people. People who score high in conscientiousness tend to check email more often than other people because they want to stay on top of things. They don't want anything to fall through the cracks.

And of course, there's the design of our devices. The smartphone was introduced in 2007, and that led to a shortening of our attention spans because we spent quite a bit of our time on our smartphones. Also, the way social media is designed, this idea of infinite scrolling, and social media platforms constrain the length of content. Quite a few sites have constrained content. So, we're getting content in short bits as opposed to lengthy passages. So there are a number of reasons why our attention spans have shortened.

CC: For sure. Yeah, there is so much going on there. And one of the things that we've seen as a big behavior change in the workplace, we've called it living on screen. And what we're seeing is people not only spending a tremendous amount of time on a screen, but actually starting to forego in-person interactions even when they're available. We're seeing 50% of people globally are sitting at their desk to take a meeting virtually when there's already a meeting room, and they could go in person maybe just down the hallway. And that's a fascinating phenomenon to me, and I wonder how you think about that in terms of how it impacts our relationships and ties into our ability to pay attention.

GM: It absolutely affects our relationships, our work relationships. Let me tell you an interesting piece of data that we found. So, we did a study where we equipped 750 people with sensors for an entire year across the United States, and we recorded what they did in the workplace. We did this unobtrusively, of course, with their full consent. And we recorded their location, their physical activity, their stress, a number of things. We found that 90% of the day they spend sedentary.

CC: Wow.

GM: They spend in their offices not moving. Now, I looked around for earlier data, and it's not a perfect comparison, but earlier data found things like 30%, 35%, 28%.

CC: Oh my gosh, that's a huge difference.

GM: So what you're saying actually has an empirical basis to it. Now, it's not good for our relationships. So let me tell you one big way why it's not. A lot of the way that we develop social relationships in the workplace is through informal interaction. So you meet people in the hall, and a big part of it is the kind of chitchat you engage in before and after meetings. And when people are on Zoom meetings, you have a strict schedule, you have an 11 o'clock meeting, a noon meeting, there is generally no time, and the technology is not conducive for people to have this kind of small chitchat where they get to know each other and where they get to bond with each other. So yeah, Zoom meetings turn informal interaction into more of a formal structured interaction, and we lose the opportunity to really get to know other people. And of course, when you're engaging in interactions on screen, we miss out on so much social information.

We miss out on gestures and body stance, and we tend to not give the same kind of facial expression as we do when we're in person. So yeah, it's definitely impacted relationships.

CC: For sure. I would like to ask a little bit about your book. So it's called "Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness, and Productivity," which sounds great. And one of the things that I was interested in was something that made me, I guess, feel a little bit better about my attention span. You say that we can't always hold our attention for long periods of time. And you kind of use the analogy of weightlifting. Could you tell us about that?

GM: Sure. There is this common misperception that we should focus if we can throughout the day. And if you Google this, you'll see consultants who say how to focus 10 hours, how to focus nonstop. But our minds are just not equipped to be able to focus for long extended periods of time. We have limited attentional resources or cognitive resources. And what happens when we focus is that these resources drain. We use these resources to process information. And when you're focusing for a long-extended period without any break, we get exhausted.

And that's where this metaphor of lifting weights comes in. You can't lift weights all day without getting exhausted. So, it's so important to take breaks, to have some quiet time, to let our cognitive resources replenish. Then we can come back, and we can be more refreshed. Now, we've done a study and we found that 20 minutes in nature, taking a break, leads people to have greater what's called divergent thinking, which is brainstorming. People are more creative. There's other research that shows a mere 20 minutes in nature can de-stress people. And you don't have to be in nature. You can move around, you can walk around, but it's really important to be able to build those breaks into our day.

CC: And when I think about what you're saying, just in terms of how it impacts workplaces, we're very fortunate because we do have walking paths around outside our workplace, but even on interiors, even in urban interiors, I've been in some great offices where they've just thought about biophilia and having great terraces or other things that you may not be able to walk in the woods, but we can create those kinds of places for people.

Another myth that you talk about, this one actually surprised me because it was about kind of doing mindless activity on our devices. And so, I want you to clarify that for me and for everybody listening, because I thought really is like, do you mean Candy Crush or something is totally mindless? Or is it more like playing Wordle where at least I'm using my brain a little bit, but there's value in doing those kinds of things, right?

GM: There is value.

CC: I say that with a question mark.

GM: Yeah, there is value, but let me clear up a misconception. We can't do that for long extended periods of time. We have to set a time limit on it. So, I call these kinds of activities, rote activities. They're easy, they're engaging, and we find that people are happiest when they do these kinds of activities because they're easy. They give people rewards, very simple rewards. Now, it doesn't have to be on screen. It could be things like knitting. Some people talk about how knitting has a calming effect on them. One person I spoke to has this screen and a ball, and he just likes to mindlessly bounce the ball on this screen. He said it clears his mind. There's a lot of different ways that people can do these kinds of rote activities. It's about stepping away from doing something intense that requires you to focus and be stressed. It's about giving your mind a bit of a break. But of course, the best break is to walk around, go outside if possible.

CC: Got it.

GM: So, I am not saying that people should spend lengthy periods of time on it, but a few minutes to clear your head is just fine. But taking a 20-minute break and moving around and going outside, that can work wonders.

CC: That explains so much why I feel like when I'm not at work, I want to do something like even for a few minutes going out into my garden to be able to step out and just do something for a little while just to be able to give myself a little bit of that mental break. It makes so much sense.

GM: Gardening is a wonderful rote activity.

CC: Except sometimes it's hard to stop once you get started because you see one more thing that needs to be done.

So, another thing that you talk about that I found quite interesting was, and I think this is more for group-based work, but the concept of creating war rooms or these kind of group project spaces for heavy levels of collaboration. Can you talk about that as opposed to kind of an individual type of solution?

GM: Sure. So these kinds of war rooms are very good for people that are working collectively on a project. An example of such a war room was set up by the Jet Propulsion Lab at NASA for people to design a conceptual space mission. People would come together in the same room, and there were a lot of advantages. You could listen to other people's comments, and if you heard something that was relevant to you, you'd run over and join them. So, it made for very efficient interaction. And at the same time, there was technology, and that's really important to enable this kind of fast collaboration. They had a public display that showed the state of the design. So people, if they found an error, they could call it out, the entire room could come to a halt and regroup and go back and fix the error. So there are a lot of advantages. Now, the disadvantages are that it's not a work style for everyone. Sure, there is a self-selection process. It can be very noisy. It can be chaotic. There's really not much privacy. And if you are a person who prefers to work in a quiet place, it's not a room for you.

CC: That's not it, right?

GM: But it's sort of like having all the cogs in a machine synchronized and working together, and it can produce very efficient results. The Jet Propulsion Lab was able to cut down the time that they did a space mission design from what had been six months, where they would meet once a week, they'd find out there was an error, they'd have to go back, repair it, meet the next week. They cut it down to just nine hours, and they were able to complete the design in that period of time because if there was an error that was found, it was rectified immediately.

CC: I think that there's a lot of insight there for us because I do think we tend to always think about focus purely from an individual perspective versus this kind of group work perspective. And being able to have places where you can do that kind of collaborative work together and really stay focused on what you're trying to do is helpful. You mentioned noise a moment ago in terms of what it's like to be in one of those war room experiences, and I am curious what you think about all of that. Do we have to start thinking about ways to manage noise to help us focus? Or do we just need to be able to adapt? What do you think?

GM: Well, so in terms of noise, yes, I think it is important to be able to manage noise. Ambient noise can distract us. People talking can distract us. Now, if you're in a war room, you're intentionally there and you actually want to be distracted because you're listening for information that can help you do your particular task. So that's a very different kind of situation. But if your work is not related or maybe only peripherally related to what other people are doing, then you do want to reduce noise. So, Gloria, before I let you go, I just want to ask you, if you were coming to visit us and you had a chance to talk to workplace designers and just share with them some of your thoughts about if you could do this one thing to help people focus better, what would it be?

GM: So, I would go back to the idea of breaks and I would want to see a quiet time instituted in the workplace. It would be a time when electronic communications could not be sent, and people would not be expected to reply to them. It's basically a time to allow people to focus and do their work. I would also want to see a period of time where people can just contemplate, to have permission to contemplate, even to meditate, to let their minds relax. Because by doing less, you can actually do more.

We don't want to see people exhausted and burnt out because that's what the research is showing. There was a recent study that showed about 60% of people reported symptoms of burnout and exhaustion, and we don't want to be seeing that. We want to give people space to be able to recuperate, to refresh their minds so they don't get into that burned-out state. When you leave your workplace at the end of the day exhausted, there are carryover effects, and we carry those over into our personal lives. I would also say that I'm a big believer in the right to disconnect. What that means is that after work hours, people should not be penalized for not answering electronic workplace communications. Why? Because people need time to psychologically detach from work.

CC: Tell me more about that.

GM: Psychologically detaching means to pull your mind away from work and to be thinking of other things, like friends and family and entertainment. When you can psychologically detach, then people can better psychologically reattach to work the next day. They're more present in the workplace, which means they're more engaged and more motivated because they had time to pull away. So that's really important. I would love for workplaces to have a right to disconnect policy. And then I think it's really important for workplaces to batch email. So, in other words, instead of sending email continually…

CC: Oh, instead of constant…

GM: Constant, because people do check their email on average 77 times a day. We know this.

CC: Wow.

GM: There's a lot of reasons. It's because they want to maintain social capital and because they feel under pressure that they have to respond. But if email were only sent out, say in the morning, after lunch, and at the end of the day, then people could rewire their expectations and they would have longer chunks of time that they can work without getting interrupted. So, I do think that we can rearrange the way that workplaces are designed, not just physically, but also in terms of the kinds of policy that's enacted.

CC: There is so much for us to think about. Gloria, I'm glad that you joined us and that you could start us thinking more about this. I would really suggest to all our listeners that you take a look at Gloria's book. Again, it's called "Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness, and Productivity." Because I think we're all looking for that right now. So, thank you so much for joining us today, Gloria.

GM: Thank you for having me.

Chris: Rebecca, tell us what's coming up next week?

Rebecca: Next week we're talking about the unconscious reactions we have to our workplaces. Dr. Libby Sander shares her research on how our physical environments influence our thinking, mood & physiological stress, as well as outcomes such as engagement, empowerment, collaboration and performance.

Chris: The research she's been able to complete is groundbreaking – actually showing a causation between our physical environment and our stress or mood.

If you enjoyed today's conversation, would you share the episode with a friend or colleague, like us and visit us as steelcase.com/reserach to sign up for weekly updates on workplace, research, insights and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.