Screens Are Shrinking Our Attention Span

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How long can you pay attention? Most people won't make it to the end of this article. Our ability to pay attention dropped more than 30% in the last two decades — down to 47 seconds. A decade ago people ranked conversations as the worst office noise offender. Now open-office virtual meetings are exacerbating the problem.

The Institute for Sustained Attention founder, D. Graham Burnett, calls it the "fracking of our brains." Loud voices, fun ringtones and smart watches are all vying for mindshare. Two-thirds of people say noise makes it hard to focus at work, according to Steelcase global research. Even working from home fails to guarantee focus. Kids, pets and chores pull at us.

"Switch Cost"

Our lack of attention hurts our work performance and our health. Gloria Mark, Ph.D., has studied our shrinking attention spans for decades. Her research shows a direct correlation between attention-switching and stress. People wearing heart monitors showed a rise in blood pressure when they multitasked. Multiple studies report multitasking leads to errors. And performance slows as a result of a "switch cost." When your attention shifts, it takes more time to reorient yourself to the original activity and continue your work.

Deep Work

There are different types of attention. Deep work is the ability to immerse yourself in a complex task completely and requires a difficult-to-achieve concentration level. Deep work is worth pursuing because it promotes a sense of flow and meaning, and it's critical to mastering difficult topics more quickly, according to Cal Newport, author of Deep Work. It also takes practice and purposeful environments devoid of distractions.

Designing for Distractions

Finding, capturing and designing for attention involves thinking about every part of the work experience. Some organizations institute quiet hours or meeting-free days. AI supports focus by blocking time on calendars and muting notifications. And some people find success in the Pomodoro Technique — a time management method where you set a timer for 25 minutes, focus on your work and then take a five-minute break.

Our environments play a critical role in how we are affected by the stimuli around us, including what we hear and see. Boundaries, barriers and even plants can block visual distractions and free people from feeling overexposed. The ability to claim a space and control it gives people territorial privacy and a sense of psychological safety. It's natural to feel threatened when someone approaches from behind.

Feeling safe allows us to relax and focus longer. Designing for acoustics is especially challenging because the solution isn't as simple as stifling all sound. "Total silence isn't always the goal. It makes it uncomfortable for people to talk," says Bren Walker, collaborating partner, Kirkegaard. "We both hear and feel sound waves which is why a lack of noise sucks the energy or buzz from a space. A little reverberation gives you some of yourself back that's not disruptive, it's lively."

Walker recommends defining which spaces need which acoustic characteristics. Think about who is using the space and how you want them to feel when they enter it. Create a variety of spaces that let people find what works for them. Consider how to design what people hear and how they hear it.

Architecture has the largest impact on acoustics. High ceilings bounce sound down which feels like an echo. Two parallel walls cause sound to bounce between them. Consider how to adjust architecture (slant a wall or lower a ceiling) to improve acoustics or take advantage of existing spaces with good acoustic properties. Other considerations include:

- Boundaries can help dampen noise in areas where people work near colleagues and need to focus.
- Materiality can add acoustic performance. Consider how fabrics that absorb or mute sound can be used on walls, floors, ceilings, mobile screens and other furniture.
- Adjacencies are everything. Plan for what is nearby when you design social, private and deep focus spaces to prevent problems.
- Soundscapes bring the benefits of natural sound indoors. Adding sound to the workplace can create healthier buildings. For example, soundscape provider Moodsonic uses technology and science to curate natural sounds inside. Background soundscapes can mask distractions and contribute to concentration, privacy and comfort.
- A variety of sensory zones — calm or lively — lets people with different preferences and sensitivities find their best space. People can intuitively understand the purpose of the space when what they hear is aligned with how the space is being used.