



CONQUER THE

demons OF distraction

BY GERALDINE MARKEL, PhD

You're working twice as hard to make half as much in this down economy—and it doesn't look like it will improve soon.

You need to retain your current clients, expand your markets, create or update your materials, write blogs and so on. Yet your productivity is constantly interrupted by the blaring of phones and beeping of emails and other digital wonders. In your push to be profitable, you're flirting with exhaustion and stress.

Before you demand more hours in the day, look at the irritating number of digital distractions you handle—a significant barrier to your productivity and profitability. They're triggered by the Technology Demon, a mysterious force that swirls around you to interrupt your flow of mental energy.

You're likely plagued by digital distractions for four reasons.

First, today's culture of information overload poses an unrealistic expectation of being available on a 24/7 basis.

And within every work setting is an unrelenting flow of emails and seductive forays on the Internet.

Second, if you're a professional speaker who works at home, you face additional challenges. Although you enjoy the comfort of working in your sweats, you might find it hard to stick to a schedule, create a work-friendly environment, and ignore others' demands for your time.

Third, although your varied responsibilities call for a well-rounded set of skills, you might prefer interacting with others rather than on focusing on mundane details—keeping records, paying bills, sending out invoices, to name a few. Chances are you've developed your presentation skills, but have no formal training in accounting, marketing, writing, advertising or computer skills. Having a low interest in such tasks, it's easy to escape the drudgery through digital distractions.

THE EVIL EMPIRE OF EMAIL

Many people in business feel overwhelmed with the need to respond to the 100 or more emails they receive each day. Not a surprise. Estimates indicate that 294 billion emails are sent each day, with about 75 percent of that number considered spam, according to research by the Radicati Group in 2011.

Are you among those who feel acute pressure and shame when you can't keep up with the barrage of messages you receive? If so, it's critical to adopt a few strategies and stop the deluge of useless email so you can focus on only the necessary ones.

How?

Estimate the amount of time you devote to email each day. Then reduce that amount by 10 percent and calculate how much time you'd gain for relaxing or exercising or doing other tasks.

SELF-CHECK

The Technology Demon

Read each statement under Activity and check all that apply to you. Then visualize events that occurred over the last few days and estimate the number of times a day you were distracted or interrupted. Write down that estimate for the appropriate questions.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ACTIVITY	TIMES PER DAY
<input type="checkbox"/>	1 I misplace or lose devices such as a cell phone, PDA or iPad.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	2 I waste money overusing shopping, gaming or gambling websites.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	3 I am interrupted and sometimes feel overwhelmed by the chirping or ringing of cell phones and alerts.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	4 I waste time using social networks, surfing the Internet or playing games.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	5 I am distracted when driving due to use of my cell phone or iPad.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	6 I rarely use security and back-up procedures for my computer or other devices.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	7 I don't have an organized system for storing manuals, passwords, log-ins or technical support information.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	8 I rarely schedule time to organize or delete old messages or files.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	9 I have trouble keeping track of paraphernalia such as chargers and cords.	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	10 I forget to schedule regular maintenance for equipment, software or virus-scanning updates.	_____

If you checked more than one or two items, the Technology Demon may be inhibiting your efficiency. Do you see how better management of technology yields higher productivity and lowers stress? Strive to get a handle on digital distractions every day.

Fourth, given the gregarious nature of speakers, you might be reticent to set limits that ward off interruptions through texts, emails, calls or social media. Beware: They can quickly sabotage your best efforts to stay on track.

You're Not Alone

If distraction poses problems for you, you have lots of company. Studies show dealing with interruptions at work consumes more than two hours a day—or 28 percent of the entire workday. How many times have you lamented, “I wish

I weren't constantly interrupted,” or “Once I get interrupted, it takes a long time to get back on track”?

Even before the emergence of Twitter, an Associated Press article in 2007 indicated a worker's mind wanders about one-third of the workday due to interruptions from others and self-distractions. They can deplete your mental energy and divert your attention from important tasks, thus reducing your productivity.

In the image-based speaking profession, speakers certainly don't want to project a “flakey” impression to clients.

What might a client think if you forget to attach a document or send a product invoice for \$9500.00 when the correct amount is \$95.00? Clearly, when you're distracted while working on your computer, idiocy is only a click away.

Face the Issue Straight On

Although you might be tempted to minimize or dismiss the effects of distraction, instead, face the issue directly. It's time to analyze the irritating, sometimes disastrous, effects of the Technology Demon and its distractions on your work/life.

Start by asking these questions:

- Am I suffering constant and irritating digital distractions?
- To what degree do distractions lead to inattention, forgetfulness and disorganization—aka stress?
- How much more could I accomplish if I weren't so distracted?
- What are the costs and consequences of distractions?
- How do distractions undermine my attempts to align with my deepest values?

Did your answers reveal an inverse relationship between distraction and the effectiveness of your attention, memory, organization and motivation? Would you admit that the more distractions and interruptions coming your way, the less mental energy you have for focusing?

Don't freeze in frustration. You have the power to **FOCUS**.

F: FIND the three most common distractions that sabotage your efforts to stay on track.

O: OVERCOME them by setting up a distraction-free environment, committing to rules and routines that reduce technology overuse/abuse and imposing

limits on others' interruptions.

C: CONCENTRATE for short rather than long periods; constantly monitor the accuracy and completeness of your work.

U: USE AIDS AND RESOURCES

such as alarms and noise-canceling headphones. Hire a productivity coach.

S: SCHEDULE TIME to think, analyze and create. Employ strategies I call the Electronic Lockdown, the No-Fly Zone, and the Stop, Look and Listen Technique.

Here are the five key actions in detail:

FIND. Assess which aspects of your digital world interrupt you and impede your productivity. How much time/money does it actually cost you when you procrastinate or get lost on the Internet? How much stress does this trigger? How much more profitable would you be if you spent more time on creative and analytical thinking? Perhaps you'd gain the mental energy to develop that new book or webinar?

OVERCOME. You can increase your creativity in three ways. First, establish a distraction-free work setting and protect your workspace from extraneous sights and sounds. For example, move your desk from a window to face a wall. Second, establish rules and routines to follow. No email or Internet before you do necessary tasks; limit checking emails and/or social media to three times a day. Third, impose limits on interruptions from others. Tell friends and family you don't want them to "touch base" during business hours. Give them times you're available and lavishly praise

those who respect the limits you set. **CONCENTRATE.** A smart, competent, motivated person can accomplish a great deal in a short time—with deep concentration on the task at hand. This is especially true when you already know what you need to do and know how to do it. If you've lined up boring, tedious tasks to accomplish, you might be tempted to turn to digital distractions that are more fun. So set aside a short (rather than long) period to tackle the mundane. Say, "I'll just spend 20 minutes on this today and stop. That's as much as I can stand." Then evaluate the accuracy of completeness of your work. Surprisingly, most people get more done in that 20 minutes than they thought they could.

USE AIDS AND RESOURCES. You can use an alarm to signal the start and end of your computer time. (Even on the weekends, allow yourself only a specific period to deal with email. And stick with it!) If you're particularly sensitive to noise, consider using earplugs or "white noise" from a fan to help screen out distractions. If you struggle to reduce distractions, hire a coach or other expert to help you change your habits.

SCHEDULE TIME TO THINK, ANALYZE AND CREATE. Select strategies to screen out digital distractions so you can muster the energy to do important "thinking." For example, the *Electronic Lockdown* entails declaring a lockdown of your digital devices: computer, cell phone, beeper, television, iPod and more. Even if you impose an electronic lockdown for only 20 minutes at a time, you'll likely get more accomplished—and enjoy a greater sense of satisfaction—than without it. Or establish a *No Fly Zone*—a location

or setting where others can't interrupt your work. Alternatively, you could post on your closed door a sign like this: "Please do not disturb. Genius at work." Then post a paper on the door for people to write down their questions for you.

A Paradoxical Love/Hate Situation

What a paradoxical situation! On one hand, speakers need the technology to conduct business as well as personal affairs. On the other hand, if speakers fail to be disciplined, the technology they depend on subverts our efforts to perform with speed and accuracy. When overused or abused, it disrupts your thinking, wastes time, leads to inaccuracies—and ultimately fosters stress.

Yes, it takes *conscious effort* and *proven strategies* to deal with the Technology Demon. But developing them is well worth your while. When you reduce distractions, you have the mental energy to pay attention to the bottom line.

So rather than letting this demon control your activities, stare it down. You decide which creative, marketing, or business activities to spend your time on. You'll enjoy fewer distractions and greater productivity—and profitability—in the long run.



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