

Q + A with David Rock

How to think deeply at work, how leaders think, and how the unconscious mind tackles problems that are too big for the conscious mind to solve—these are the kinds of things that David Rock thinks and writes about.

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CHANCES ARE YOU'LL BE INTERRUPTED BEFORE YOU CAN FINISH READING THIS ARTICLE

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Rock coined the term “neuroleadership,” and cofounded the NeuroLeadership Institute to help people and companies better understand how the brain functions. For example, he wrote recently about a study conducted by the NeuroLeadership Group that asked 6,000 people where they believed they did their best thinking. Only 10 percent said it occurred at work—a sobering thought for business leaders.

Rock is quick to point out that he's not a neuroscientist; he works to bring neuroscientists and leadership experts together to build the science for leadership development. A consultant and author, Rock received his professional doctorate in the Neuroscience of Leadership from Middlesex University in London, England.

The typical manager is interrupted every 8 minutes, and employees spend, on average, 28% of their time dealing with unnecessary interruptions and getting back on track. Fortunately, David Rock can explain why and what to do about it. He's written a best selling book on the topic, “Your Brain At Work.” The founder of the global consulting firm NeuroLeadership Group, Rock works on the faculty of the international business school, Cimba, and blogs for major publications about leadership, organizational effectiveness and the brain.

Interruptions and distractions reduce productivity and affect every company's bottom line. Understanding how to focus and think better has important implications for business, and offers the potential to help everyone's wellbeing.

You say we face “an epidemic of overwhelm” today. How so?

Since “Your Brain At Work” came out a few years ago, the amount of distractions that we all deal with each day and the actual amount we need to achieve per hour have gone up considerably. Information travels literally at the speed of light, many times faster than it traveled just 200 years ago. With this efficiency of information flow and communication, we’re decreasing our ability to pay attention and make decisions. People’s attention spans are significantly decreased because there are limitations in our capacity to process, limits to what we can do. For example, we know we can’t have five conversations at once, but many of us try to have two conversations at once and don’t recognize that that’s quite damaging.

Is distraction the reason it's so hard to work at our peak every day?

Distraction is one reason. Another is that the amount we try to achieve in a day is unrealistic. Track your effectiveness over a day and you’ll find you have a few hours at best of really productive time, and many hours of semi-productive time. We expect to be able to go full tilt all day, and this puts a lot of strain on our attention and decision-making capacities. We tire them out without giving them much rest, and then, to make things worse, we put ourselves in the way of technology that creates incredible distraction.

How much of a distraction is technology?

I think technology has primed us to be distracted. There’s good research showing that people who use a lot of media, who use two screens at once and who multitask, actually become more distracted and worse at multitasking. In fact, the more you multitask the worse you get at it. You become actually more and more distracted and it becomes harder and harder to focus. Research shows that high media users are on the ADD continuum. They find it very, very hard to focus.

How does distraction affect our work?

When you lose your place in a thought because of a distraction, it takes quite some time to go back and re-find your place in your mind, not just in a book or a document. Every time you’re distracted, it takes quite a lot of energy to regroup and get back on track. That effort is very tiring. But it’s also tiring for our brains to consciously work to avoid distractions, so we often respond to distractions.

“Social interactions are delicious things to the brain.”

Are some distractions worse than others?

Most distractions are social, and social interactions are delicious things to the brain. The brain loves to know what's going on in the social environment, and it's incredibly important to our survival to know what's happening socially. Whether it's someone walking past your desk or someone sending an email, we can't help but check out who that person is, are they okay? It's a knee jerk reaction. These distractions are almost impossible to avoid, and we need to learn to create time and space, perhaps to switch things off, to do deeper thinking.

What's the optimal environment for people to work in?

There's no one optimal environment. Even for an individual in a particular role, the optimum environment changes across the day, across the week. There are times when we need to be able to completely shut out the world and not be distracted at all. There are also times when we want to work around other people and sense that buzz, such as in a café.

There's also the environment for collaborating with people, where you want to be able to write on everything and make your thinking visible in lots of different ways, and be able to move things around. We need those options to come together and make thinking visible, or to go away and do quiet work and then come back together. Ideally the environment enables people to move between those different spaces as they need them. It gives people some needed autonomy.

Providing autonomy, or control, seems like an advantage in preventing distractions.

Research shows that giving people autonomy over their space resulted in about a one-third increase in productivity. So it's not necessarily the case of what is the ideal workspace, but understanding that people have changing needs throughout the day and the week and should be able to control their work environment and choose how they work.

Why do some distractions, such as taking a walk or a change of scenery, help us focus?

Our ability to solve problems logically is very limited. Most problems of any basic complexity require the unconscious brain to actually solve the problem. So once you get to a certain level of complexity, the best way to solve a problem is to pose the question and then do something that's slightly distracting, to forget about the problem and do something else pleasant for a while. The unconscious brain keeps going, and then when you come back to the problem you get a much better answer than actually trying to continue to solve the problem logically.

How can we take advantage of these helpful distractions?

We need to quiet down the brain overall to be able to notice quiet insights. Taking a walk, doing some exercise, or doing anything slightly pleasant can quiet your brain overall so you can start to hear the subtle signals. In the new "Men in Black" movie, one guy says to the other, "Let's go eat some pie to solve this complex problem." The second guy looks to the first one, thinking he's crazy. But they eat some pie and a solution pops up. This is actually very rooted in science! If you can quiet your brain by doing something pleasant and easy on the brain, a solution is more likely to occur to you.

How can we control annoying distractions at work?

First, it's important to remember that attention is a limited resource. It doesn't matter how something gets our attention, but once it actually gets our attention, we've got to put a lot of effort now to get back to where we were, and that's intrinsically very tiring. That's why it's important to have places where people are able to shut out the world and focus when they need to, and also places where they're able to collaborate when they need to collaborate. It's about choice and autonomy. Being able to move between these different spaces as you need to is critically important.

Another important need is space where you can have unexpected social encounters. Random social connections are important because, as I said, social connections matter a lot to the brain.

If we give people the opportunity to focus when they need to, the opportunity to collaborate when they need to, and the opportunity to have great social interactions, I think we're giving people what they really need at work.

7 ACTIVITIES FOR A HEALTHIER BRAIN

A brain needs attention to be healthy. In fact, it needs seven kinds of attention, according to David Rock. Here are the different neuro-cognitive activities that nurture the mind:

Sleep time	refreshing the mind and body, and consolidating memory.
Play time	the joy of experimenting with life.
Downtime	disconnecting for integration and insight.
Time-in	reflection, attunement and mindfulness.
Connecting time	the healing power of relationships.
Physical time	improving the brain's plasticity through exercise.
Focus time	attention management for performance.

"To be ultimately healthy, we really need all seven of these types of activity," says Rock. "The ones we tend to disregard are sleep time, social time and play time. These tend to be much more important, in particular social time, than we realized for healthy brain functioning."

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