

How To Waste Time Properly

The right distractions can boost creativity.

BY GREG BEATO

Ever since Frederick Winslow Taylor timed the exact number of

seconds that Bethlehem Steel workers took to push shovels into a load of iron ore and then draw them out, maximizing time efficiency has been a holy grail of the American workplace. But psychologists and neuroscientists are showing us the limits of this attitude: Wasting time, they say, can make you more creative. Even seemingly meaningless activities such as watching cat videos on YouTube may help you solve math problems.

Brent Coker, who studies online behavior at the University of Melbourne in Australia, found that people who engage in “workplace Internet leisure browsing” are about 9 percent more productive than those who don’t. Last year, Jonathan Schooler, a psychology professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara published with his doctoral student Benjamin Baird a study called *Inspired by Distraction*. It concluded that “engaging in simple external tasks that allow the mind to wander may facilitate creative problem solving.”

Schooler gave participants a series of “unusual uses tasks” (UUTs), which asked them to invent as many different uses as they could for a mundane

object. The more original the responses, the more creativity they were demonstrating. After performing a baseline test, participants were divided into groups and given different 12-minute “incubation” periods. These consisted of either a demanding memory task, an undemanding memory task that allowed for mind-wandering, or total rest. A fourth group had no incubation interval at all. Then all four groups were presented with more UUTs, which involved at least one object from the first round. The group that had been given a non-demanding incubation task showed the most-improved UUT scores.

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“The most surprising result of the study was that the non-demanding task was actually better than doing nothing,” Schooler says. Why this is so, however, is less clear. “My best guess is that if you’re engaged in a non-demanding task, it kind of prevents you from having long trains of thought,” Schooler posits. “It’s sort of churning things up, stirring the pot, so you’re not maintaining one thought for a particularly long time. There are a lot of different ideas going in and out, and that sort of associative process leads to creative incubation.”

Schooler isn’t alone in his conclusion. In 2006, psychologist Ap Dijksterhuis at Radboud University in the Netherlands also found that people tasked with making a complex decision do better when they are allowed a brief period of distraction before deciding. He presented his study participants with a list of cars and their attributes, both positive and negative. Then he asked

participants to assess the cars' quality. One group had to think about the information they had learned for four minutes before making their assessments. The other group was asked to perform a "distractor task" during that four-minute interlude. The group that performed a "distractor task" demonstrated the best judgment.

A few years later, Carnegie Mellon student James Bursley, Carnegie Mellon psychology professor David Cresswell, and Northeastern University research scientist Ajay Satpute replicated Dijksterhuis's study. But they went a step further—they used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to track the brain activity of their subjects. Their research confirmed that decision-related neural processes were occurring during moments of "unconscious thought." Bursley says it happened because unconscious thought and conscious thought recruited "distinct non-overlapping neural regions." The neural regions responsible for unconscious thought continue to process previously recorded information, which results in unconscious decision-making that can be "called up to consciousness" when needed. In layman's terms, it means that we're capable of paying explicit attention to one thing (cat videos) while resolving another (complex math problems). "Brief periods of unconscious thought can improve decision-making," the authors concluded in the January 2013 issue of *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience Advance Access*.

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So what kinds of distractions, exactly, are best? “You want a distractor that’s pretty far away from what you want to process unconsciously,” Bursley says. If you want your brain to unconsciously process a math problem, it would be better to have the distractor be something totally different, like playing tennis, he says, rather than something similar, like a spatial puzzle.

Which is all great advice for your few-minute work break. But entrepreneur Jacques Habra is taking these findings further—he wants to build an ideal distraction, and make money off of it. Habra’s start-up, SelfEcho, is developing an app called UpJoy, which is a recommendation engine for positive and motivational video imagery. Tell it what type of content interests you—sports, animals, nature, humor, or compassion, for example—and it will unleash a stream of clips and images that have been previously viewed by large numbers of viewers and dubbed sufficiently positive by a majority of them. Over time, UpJoy will learn what you respond best to, and will filter its stream to your tastes. “It’s exactly the kind of intervention that our research suggests would benefit creativity for two reasons,” says Schooler, who is helping SelfEcho develop the software. “One is that it enhances mood, and it’s a very well-established fact that things that are mood uplifting lead to enhanced creativity. And two, it provides a non-demanding break.”

Habra says that images which encourage you to think about the future or inspire a sense of exploration are also good distractors. So do images that are “ego-less”—that do not involve the specifics of your life. “When people take a break at work and get on Facebook, it becomes an ego-driven experience,” says Habra. “They see someone’s pictures from vacation, and

they think, ‘Why isn’t that me? I wish I was on vacation too.’ ” If you want to get the most out of your time-wasting, stare at random YouTube babies, not the babies of your Facebook friends.

SelfEcho is working to determine the ideal duration and number of breaks a day to prevent a phenomenon known as hedonic adaptation. “As we adjust to things, both positive or negative, their emotional intensity is reduced and we become largely immune to their effect,” Habra says. The daily amount of time people can spend on UpJoy will have limits, at least in settings where it’s being deployed with the goal of productivity enhancement.

The ghost of Frederick Winslow Taylor must be nodding in approval: Finally, break time—the last unmanaged part of the workday—will no longer be a waste of time.

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