

"The methods of this book have made a huge difference in my work, leadership, and private life. I am convinced it can do the same for you."

FROM THE FOREWORD BY ROBERT STEMBRIDGE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, ACCENTURE TECHNOLOGY

ONE SECOND AHEAD

**ENHANCE YOUR PERFORMANCE
AT WORK *with* MINDFULNESS**

RASMUS HOUGAARD

with **JACQUELINE CARTER**

and **GILLIAN COUTTS**

FOCUSED MINDS = ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE

More Praise for *One Second Ahead*

“Rasmus Hougaard and The Potential Project have cleverly combined two hot topics in today’s work life: mindfulness and working more effectively. You can find thousands of useful books on both topics, but Rasmus has gone one step further. Putting together a great variety of work techniques with mindfulness creates an extremely powerful toolset for any professional who not only wants more from him/herself, but is also interested in own self’s wellbeing.”

—Jouni Torunen, HR Director, Nokia

“*One Second Ahead* is a major contribution to bringing not only more sanity and mindfulness at the work place but also a more caring and open-minded attitude in all walks of life. Highly recommended.”

—Matthieu Ricard, humanitarian and Buddhist monk,
author of *Altruism: How Compassion Can Change
Your Life and the World*.

“In *One Second Ahead* Rasmus Hougaard ingeniously applies time-tested ancient methods of mental training to practical day-to-day circumstances that are regularly encountered in the business world. This book is bound to be of much practical benefit to all those who seek a more satisfying, creative, and fulfilling way of life within their professional and personal relationships.”

—B. Alan Wallace, Ph.D. Author of bestseller
The Attention Revolution and President,
Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies

“Like many other busy professionals we at Herbert Smith Freehills face the same demands of long working hours, increasing commercial complexity, and competing distractions for our attention and for our effort. To be a globally elite law firm, we need to be focused, crystal clear in our thinking and highly effective. This book distils the essence of the Potential Project’s mindfulness program. If you put into action what you learn here, particularly the daily practice, then I am sure you will gain a greater sense of who you are, and a sense of calm and perspective that will enable you to be the best person you can be at work and at home.”

—Murray Paterson, Head of Capability Development,
Herbert Smith Freehills, Australia

“A mindful organization is an organization where our leaders and employees do the right things—not just things. Through the program behind this book, we have gradually become a mindful organization”

—Former CIO, Carlsberg, Kenneth Egelund Schmidt

“Rasmus Hougaard, Jacqueline Carter and Gillian Coutts have skillfully woven an elegant set of mindfulness tools and strategies that any professional can implement. This is a fantastic foundation for a more mindful workplace and life.”

—Jeremy Hunter, PhD, Associate Professor of Practice
Peter F. Drucker and Masatoshi Ito Graduate
School of Management

“In our organization we have implemented the program of mindfulness and after completing the program the stress level have decreased significantly and our employees are more focused. But the techniques outlined in *One Second Ahead* are not just for work situations, they are also highly valuable in all kind of scenario—both professional and private. The book will give you better and more mindful interactions with everyone you meet.”

—Hans Brobäck, Human Resources Director, Roche

“Since undertaking mindfulness training, I have been pleasantly surprised by the positive impact the training has had on my creativity. By choosing to focus on only one task at a time, I engage in more useful conversations with my colleagues and have also found that my enhanced concentration has significantly improved my overall creative output.”

—Nick Foley, President SE Asia Pacific & Japan, Landor

“The pace and complexity in today’s organizations affects all co-workers and leaders in all aspects. Especially when the boundaries between work and “life” becomes more and more interlinked. The decision to use CBMT as a tool in order to decrease stress levels in our organization turned out to be a real game changer for our co-workers. I can highly recommend this book because it captures all the benefits with working with CBMT in all kinds of organizations. The tone of voice is fact-driven and combines real examples from organizations backed up with theories and scientific studies.”

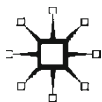
—Henrik Scheutz, Function Manager HR Service Centre,
IKEA AB

One Second Ahead

Enhance Your Performance at Work with Mindfulness

Rasmus Hougaard
Jacqueline Carter
Gillian Coutts

palgrave
macmillan



ONE SECOND AHEAD

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Foreword to *One Second Ahead*

To be honest, I am probably the last person one might expect to write a foreword to a book on mindfulness, but two years ago, I had a series of profound insights and realizations that changed my perspective in a significant way.

First, I realized my brain was full—full with all of the things associated with living a high-pressure, fast-paced, demanding life. Second, I realized that I essentially had assumed that having a “full brain” was unavoidable and that if I wanted to be a successful leader in one of the world’s largest consulting, technology, and outsourcing firms, it was simply part of the “package.”

However, I discovered another way of working and being that not only freed up brain capacity but also made me more effective, more creative, less stressed, and most probably more kind. These realizations have inspired me to write this foreword.

Strange as it may sound, I don’t really like to “practice” mindfulness. Sitting still for ten minutes a day is a stretch for me, but I have found that if I do, the quality of my leadership, my work, and my private life improves.

Let me take you back to where this all began for me. For a number of years, I have led an extremely dedicated and high-performing SWAT team located across Europe, Africa, and Latin America. This team is a small but highly specialized group designed to lead and deliver our most complex and challenging engagements for some of the largest companies globally. We travel extensively, work very long hours, and manage extremely complex business challenges with our most demanding clients. It is great and rewarding work, but there can be a cost.

When you add today's "always-on" technology, constant data overload, and extreme time pressure to the work that we do, even the best, brightest, most mentally strong and talented people are sometimes unable to cope. Stress can be a debilitating illness, and a specific event changed my perspective. I had not seen it coming, and I was stunned.

This drove me to search for tools for enhancing *sustainable* performance, tools that could help my people and me do the work we love, while performing at the highest level, but without sacrificing well-being and balance in life.

The word mindfulness kept coming up, but at first it seemed far too "fluffy" and "soft" to me, and I had a belief that that bringing mindfulness into an organization could be close to a reputation suicide. There would be skeptics who saw mindfulness as soft and flaky, and those who would demand a "business case." There would be the "wise ones" who would not see the need to change. Above all, there would be the action addicts who would equate the idea of slowing down with some form of death.

By chance, I came in contact with Rasmus Hougaard and heard of his global team of trainers and consultants and their impressive track record of great results with large companies around the world. Rasmus had spent years with researchers, business leaders, and mindfulness masters to create their program, and, contrary to my reservations, it spoke directly to the business focus of a fast-paced organization like my own.

Working together, we designed a program tailored for my team and our work environment. The results have been outstanding: 30 percent increase in focus, 23 percent increase in effective prioritization, 25 percent decrease in unproductive multitasking, 30 percent increase in sleep quality, 31 percent increased memory, and 19 percent decrease in mental tiredness and stress, to mention a few.

It is a great pleasure for me to recommend this book to you. I hope you will try out the work applications and mental strategies of mindfulness for yourself. They have made a huge difference in my work, leadership, and private life, as well as for the people on my team. I am convinced it can do the same for you.

ROBERT STEMBRIDGE,
Managing Director, Accenture Technology.

Introduction

It all started with a failure.

It was early 2005, and for the first time I had the opportunity to introduce mindfulness into a corporation. I had already practiced mindfulness for more than a decade and knew how it provided me with the focus and clarity to be more effective in my work.

Now, for the first time, I had the opportunity to give the gift of mindfulness to the staff and leaders of a division of a European professional services company.

For weeks I had planned the day. I was ready. I was passionate. From the morning up to lunch, I told stories, gave instructions, and put them to the practice. I was excited and certain they would be too.

But I was wrong. Badly wrong. After lunch, I was ready to continue—power packed and inspired. The group was not. They did not come back from lunch.

That was a tough moment for me—but it became a pivotal day. I realized how naive I had been, trying to bring something very personal into a professional context. Clearly, I had not connected the dots between mindfulness and work, between moment-by-moment awareness and success in the office. Convinced of the benefits of combining mindfulness and work life, I committed myself to finding a way to bridge the gap.

The book you are reading now is the result of that quest.

* * *

Work life has changed radically over the past few decades. People used to be able to focus their full attention on each and every task. Now they

attempt to concentrate on work while dealing with a constant stream of text messages, e-mails, phone calls, meetings, and deadlines. Faced with a relentless flood of information and distractions, our brains try to process everything at once. In other words, we try to multitask.

But researchers have shown that multitasking is the worst possible reaction to information overload. According to a McKinsey & Company report, multitasking actually “makes human beings less productive, less creative, and less able to make good decisions.”¹ In fact, numerous studies have found that modern office life is transforming competent professionals into frenzied underachievers.²

This should not be too much of a surprise. Many of us are under constant pressure, are always on, experience information overload, and work in highly distracting environments. I call it the PAID reality.



Figure I.1 The PAID reality.

As a result of the mind’s natural tendency to wander and the PAID reality, you may not be able to pay attention long enough to read the rest of this introduction. Most likely, before you get to the last page, your mind will have wandered off to whatever you need to do next. Nowadays, due to the PAID reality, we are gradually losing our ability to manage our attention.

Are we destined to have minds that constantly wander, remain inattentive, and lose focus?

Thankfully, the answer is no. It is actually possible to train the brain to respond differently to today’s constant interruptions through the practice of mindfulness.

Simply put, at its introductory level, mindfulness means trained attention. Based on thousands of years of practice, mindfulness techniques enable people to manage their attention, improve their awareness, and sharpen their focus and clarity.

One Second Ahead is about applying mindfulness techniques to daily work life. Based on a program in corporate mindfulness designed through our work in The Potential Project, this book provides real-world examples and lessons from organizations that have implemented mindfulness on a large scale. Thoroughly tested in a diverse range of industries in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, this program has resulted in measurable increases in productivity, effectiveness, job satisfaction, and much more.

In building this program, I brought together business leaders, researchers, and mindfulness masters to help develop a way to bridge mindfulness and work. After years of development, this program has been implemented by companies like Microsoft, Accenture, Roche, Nike, American Express, General Electric, Citrix, Google, Sony, Société Générale, KLM, IKEA, Royal Bank of Canada, Ogilvy, Carlsberg, and many more. Evaluated by third-party researchers, the quantitative results of this training include increased focus and effectiveness, as well as enhanced quality of life, reduced stress, and better well-being.

On an individual level, the program has helped people quickly and easily learn how to improve efficiency and increase self-control. For many of them, this has resulted in a distinct one-second edge in critical decision-making. Why one second? In today's business environment, one second is a quantifiable advantage.

"Speed wins," we often say. As human beings, we want information now; we want to take action in the moment. Whenever we are given a choice, we will opt for a service that delivers faster than the competition. There is a reason Google posts its search times. There is a reason we are increasingly turning to analytical tools like big data for near instantaneous glimpses at the information that drives our businesses.

One second matters.

So much so that today we talk of the "speed of business." How fast is that? A millisecond advantage on Wall Street has been estimated to be worth \$20 billion a year.

And from a cognitive perspective, being one second ahead provides a clear edge in effectiveness and productivity. It offers the space and freedom to choose your distractions and direct your mental energy. We

cannot always control what happens in our lives, but we can deliberately and thoughtfully choose our responses to those events.

Viktor Frankl, who survived a Nazi concentration camp, wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”³ Despite extreme conditions, he managed to choose his response rather than be a victim of his own reactivity.

This book gives you that freedom in the office or the boardroom, during a sales call or a high-stakes presentation.

To be clear, these techniques—as well as the practice of mindfulness itself—are not solely about making more money or accelerating a career. There is a bigger, more important purpose of mindfulness.

After my big failure ten years ago, the first organization that invited me to bring in corporate-based mindfulness training was the largest insurance company in Scandinavia. Thomas, the sales director of the company, sponsored the program. He initiated the program hoping to improve focus and effectiveness for himself and his staff. He experienced that happening—and he also experienced something else. Something much more significant.

He shared it with his department and me one month into the program. His words have stuck with me ever since. He said, “I have noticed that we are all becoming more effective and productive, and for this I am glad. But I’m also experiencing something more important. I feel like we’re becoming better human beings, kinder, gentler and happier.”

In the end, this is what mindfulness is about: being our best selves and realizing more of our potential in everyday life. People who are more focused, clear minded, and kind make for better organizations. And many better organizations make for a better world. Think of a world in which improving performance goes hand in hand with increasing kindness. And a world in which kindness is valued as much as efficiency and effectiveness, as much as revenue per share or operating cash flow.

It may sound overly optimistic, but I see it happening every day in the many organizations we serve around the globe.

Designed for busy professionals looking for a new way of working within high-stress, high-paced conditions, *One Second Ahead* has been written as a very practical, how-to guide. It includes research-tested tools that have been used successfully by some of today's most respected global brands.

Although the book will be of great interest to individuals in leadership roles, it has been developed to be highly relevant and applicable for people at all levels of an organization. Offering small, bite-sized techniques, the book tackles the most persistent inefficiencies and problems in the workday, such as e-mail, meetings, priorities, and planning. Each of these techniques is self-contained and easily implemented, providing readers with immediate results.

One Second Ahead draws from the wisdom and methods of a several-thousand-year-old tradition that today is known as mindfulness. While mindfulness has deep roots, its appearance in the broader culture is a more recent development. Despite the media's trumpeting of the benefits of mindfulness, however, the vast majority of people have not made mindfulness part of their daily lives and do not even know where to begin.

This book aims to change that by starting where busy people—like you—need immediate assistance: with the daily tasks that sap energy and reduce productivity. Once you have experienced success with these tasks, you can explore deeper mindfulness interventions that address the development of mental qualities such as presence, patience, kindness, and acceptance. From there, it is an easy step to transforming your life through the regular practice of mindfulness and its core tenets: sharp focus and open awareness.

The first part of the book examines mindfulness in a work-based context. This part opens with a chapter that lays the foundation for the concept of mindfulness, examines both its benefits and the data supporting its efficacy, and provides the most basic understanding necessary to succeed with the work-based techniques that follow. Divided into 16 concise modules, the techniques themselves are designed to be easily applied to daily work tasks. Integrating mindfulness into the core elements of work life, each of these techniques is intended to give you immediate benefits in productivity and performance.

In the next part, *One Second Ahead* outlines strategies for replacing negative thought patterns that could prevent you from achieving your full potential. The mental strategies in this section help rewire the brain by cultivating powerful mind qualities, as noted above. Rewiring, or retraining, the brain in this way will help you respond mindfully to unforeseen problems that crop up in the workplace, rather than reverting to negative, unhelpful habits.

Part 3 of the book offers a comprehensive look at the two foundational practices of mindfulness training: sharp focus and open awareness. Together, these two forms of training help develop a balanced and high-performing mind. Once you reach this level of understanding and commitment, you will find your ability to stay focused, aware, and mindful to be exponentially improved. You will also better understand how to apply mindfulness outside the office, experiencing greater peace and well-being in all aspects of your life.

If you want to take your training deeper and experience the full range of benefits that mindfulness offers, the last chapter in Part 3 includes a training plan for systematically implementing mindfulness on a day-to-day basis. Along with this plan, the chapter answers common questions about the daily practice of mindfulness—the how, when, and where. The chapter then concludes by discussing how mindfulness can be introduced into an organization. This includes advice and tips on how to start an organization-wide program based on experience with hundreds of companies that have successfully incorporate corporate-based mindfulness training.

Each of these parts focuses on providing you with readily applicable skills, as well as increased clarity and insight. At its core, this is a practical resource: one that delivers immediate results. But it is also an inspiring guide to working, thinking, and living better.

I have organized this book in such a way that you will have the opportunity to experience the benefits of mindfulness straight away. Although practice before theory may seem contradictory, very simply, in my experience, busy people are keen to get tools that can immediately help them in their day-to-day work life. This is a common criticism of books on mindfulness: too much mysticism and theory before the basic helpful, prescriptive information is reached. With this

structure, I put the most immediate, practical, information up front. Once you experience success in the daily tasks that define your work day, my hope is you will look to embrace the broader implications of mindfulness and deepen your understanding of its application.

To help with this evolution, I have incorporated a number of special features and practical tools throughout the book, including

- Tools and techniques for implementing mindfulness at work to enhance focus, clarity and results
- Guidelines and reflections to change how you think about people and things in the workplace towards being more calm, clear-minded, creative and kind
- Simple yet detailed step-by-step instructions for systematic mindfulness training
- Vignettes and real-world stories to help illustrate key lessons and stimulate thought
- Guidelines for a 10-minute-per-day mindfulness program guaranteed to reshape your life both at work and at home
- A link to a training app that will enhance your learning and training

This book is inspired by the thousands of people who have used these techniques and strategies and started daily mindfulness training. Hearing their stories of personal transformation and success is the main reason why I wrote this book—to share these methods with a wider audience. In these pages, I will share some of their stories with you. Please note that all of the stories are real, although some of the names have been changed to respect privacy.

Although there is a logical progression throughout *One Second Ahead*, it is also designed so that you can pick and choose the sections that are of most interest to you. This means you can jump from Part to Part or Technique to Strategy and pull out what you need, when you need it.

This book is written from a singular point of view. However, it includes the collective insights, wisdoms and experiences of myself, my co-authors and our colleagues at The Potential Project. Therefore,

when you read “I” know that it is a reflection of a collaborative effort to bring the benefits of mindfulness to workplaces around the globe.

For example, if you picked up the book because you are curious about how mindfulness can be applied to everyday work life, start with Part 1. However, if you want to dive right into more advanced mindfulness training, you can jump to Part 3. If you are in a leadership role and planning to introduce a mindfulness program to your peers and reports, you may want to go straight to the second half of the final chapter.

Regardless of how you choose to use this book, I hope it will be of long-lasting benefit to you. By practicing the book’s methods only a few minutes a day, you can develop more effective mental habits, allowing you to thrive in even the most competitive, high-pressure situations. Most important, however, *One Second Ahead* is intended to empower you—and busy people like you—by providing a road map to improving performance through greater focus, awareness and clarity of mind.

PART I

Workplace Techniques

With the rise of the Internet and the growth of mobile devices, how and where we work has shifted. We no longer need to go to work—work comes to us. Even if we do go into the office every day, work-based problems can find us night or day, in a restaurant or at the ballpark.

Over thousands of years, however, our brains have evolved to handle a very different kind of work. Humans historically survived through physical labor as hunters, farmers, and even for a period, as industrial workers. During this time, people were self-sufficient and tasks were clear: kill an animal, gather firewood, plow a field. Even on the production lines of Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor, the work was well defined—hammer x number of bolts in y hours.

In all of these cases, there was a singular focus to the work and a clear demarcation between field, forest, factory floor, and home. This means our brains aren't naturally wired to operate effectively in our new reality. To help visualize the shift, see Figure PI.1.

Today's information-driven work environment is frequently hectic and often ambiguous, with the lines between work and home becoming more and more blurred by each new productivity app. It's not hugely surprising, then, that the World Health Organization predicts work-related stress, burnout, and depression to be among the world's most prevalent diseases by 2020, joining perpetual killers like stroke and diabetes.¹

At the very least, we face a challenge. On the one hand, we have an exciting, stimulating, and complex work life. It's fast paced, dynamic,

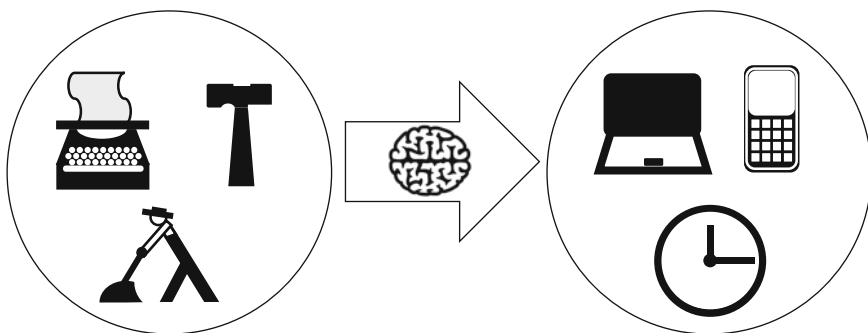


Figure PI.1 Work-life has changed.

and filled with possibility. On the other hand, we have a brain built for simpler times. Thankfully, there are things we can do to better manage the challenges of today's work life to stay one second ahead of the demands and responsibilities of our information-laden existence.

Part I of the book examines different techniques designed to help you face today's fast-paced reality with energy, enthusiasm, and balance. Presented as bite-sized, self-contained modules short enough to read during your commute or lunch break, each of the following 16 Techniques deals with ways to optimize your mental resources and well-being while facing specific challenges in the workplace. The more techniques you implement in a meaningful way, the greater benefit they'll be to you and the people you work with.

To lay the necessary foundation for applying these Techniques, Part I opens with a concise chapter that defines mindfulness, examines both its benefits and the data supporting its efficacy, and explains the most basic skills needed to implement mindfulness in an office environment.

Bear in mind, though, these techniques are just one very practical facet of the much bigger and broader tradition of mindfulness. The real key to mindfulness and a mindful life is in the daily practice, as defined and presented in Part III. My sincere hope is that once you experience success with these quick, hands-on workplace techniques, you'll be encouraged to embrace the deeper meaning of mindfulness and establish your own daily practice.

In the meantime, let's get started by exploring what it really means to get one second ahead.

CHAPTER 1

Mastering Your Mind—First Steps

Jacob was a senior manager in a European financial services company. Like most of his counterparts, he was always “on”—connected to the office in one way or another, all day, every day. Day in, day out, he dealt with a steady stream of e-mails and an overloaded calendar of meetings. When he did have a free moment, he would often be interrupted by someone phoning with yet another urgent matter that needed his immediate attention.

When I first met Jacob, he told me that he didn’t feel in control of his life. He felt like he was always trying to catch up, always overloaded with external forces—people and tasks—dictating his day-to-day reality. He felt he was living on autopilot without a clear sense of purpose and direction.

Sound familiar?

Like many of us, Jacob longed for a greater sense of control. A friend of his had recently been to one of my workshops and suggested Jacob give me a call. In our first meeting, he committed to undertake a four-month program based on the tools, techniques, and strategies presented in this book. During that time, we met for ten one-hour sessions and he dedicated ten minutes a day to mindfulness training. Though it was specifically designed as a convenient, user-friendly program, it was still a significant investment of time considering his already busy work schedule.

After the four months had gone by, I asked Jacob what he'd gained from the program.

His answer: "One second."

At first, his response took me by surprise. Four months of effort and daily training to gain only one second? That seemed like a meager return.

But then he explained, "Previously, when something happened, I reacted automatically. Every time an e-mail came in, I read it. Every time I received a text, I answered it. Whenever a thought or emotion popped into my head, I paid attention to it and allowed it to take my focus away from what I was doing. I was a victim of my own automatic reactions. The four months of training have given me a one-second mental gap between what happens and my own response. It feels like I'm one second ahead, so that I can choose my response rather than being a victim of my automatic reactions. I can't always control what happens in life, but I've developed the freedom to choose my response to it."

Jacob's story clearly describes what millions of busy people experience every day.

But one second? What can change in one second?

Everything.

One second is the difference between catching the train or being late for work. It's the difference between making a yellow light or running a red. It's the difference between a close call or a catastrophe.

In the Olympics, one second separates winning gold and being immortalized from coming in last and being forgotten.

In our low-latency world, speed is a factor in any competition—sports, politics, and especially business. This is more true now than ever before. With today's high-frequency trading, millions of dollars can change hands in a millisecond. That's one-tenth the time it takes to blink. As the speed of business approaches the speed of light, one second is the difference between performance and *high* performance.

For Jacob, one second gave him the freedom to control his thoughts, his actions, and, more profoundly, his life.

This chapter aims to jump-start your transformation toward gaining that one-second advantage in your own life. Together, we'll examine

our natural cognitive tendencies, the effect these tendencies have on productivity, and some simple—but very powerful—rules for increasing mental effectiveness.

Who Is in Control?

Life is about results. Results come from our actions. Our actions come from the choices we make. Our choices come from the thoughts we think (see Figure 1.1).

Our thoughts are the foundation for everything we want to achieve in life. Thus, our ability to manage our mind becomes critically important. We are best able to manage our thoughts when our mind is clear, calm, and focused. This is true in all aspects of life, but especially true in the workplace.

According to scientists, however, on average our mind is wandering almost half our waking hours.¹ We are constantly thinking about events that happened in the past, or might happen in the future, rather than attending to what's happening right now. This limits our ability to achieve meaningful results.

Does this apply to you? Here's a quick test to find out.

1. Set a timer for 45 seconds.
2. Focus your attention on one thought—an e-mail, a meeting, or something else.
3. Focus your full attention on this one thing and nothing else.
4. Do not pay attention to any other thoughts or sounds until the time is over.

Were you able to maintain focus on one thing? If you are like most people, you likely experienced that, during those brief 45 seconds, your mind wandered off to a variety of thoughts. Don't worry—you're perfectly normal.



Figure 1.1 Results come from your mind.

If you can relate to this experience, then you probably recognize that sometimes—or possibly often—your mind has a mind of its own. In other words, it can be difficult to control your mind and what you pay attention to. But if it's true that our thoughts shape our future, and we are really not in control of our thoughts, it raises an important question: Who's making the decisions in our lives?

For many of us, this question is becoming tougher to answer. The natural tendency for our mind to wander has worsened over the past few decades. Before the advent of the desktop computer, smartphones, and the Internet, it was easier for people to give their full attention to each task at hand. But within a relatively short span of time, we've gone from handling a typewriter and a telephone to juggling e-mails, texts, tweets, spreadsheets, reports, deadlines, and much more—all at the same time. We have mountains of evidence, as well as stacks of reports, articles, and books, outlining the detrimental effect that our recent digital immersion has had on focus and productivity.

Welcome to the Attention Economy

Work life has changed radically over the past few decades. We used to have working conditions where our attention could more easily focus on the task at hand. We are now experiencing distractions and information overload all the time. Our cell phones, tablets, e-mails, texts, and the like place constant demands on our attention. According to the former director of the Accenture Institute of Strategic Change, Tom Davenport, “Understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success.”²

We are living in an “attention economy” where the ability to manage our attention and the quality of our attention is key to our success. But in the digital age, where our ability to pay attention at will is under siege, we have a problem.

How big is this problem? Researchers studying the mind's natural tendency to wander calculated that on average our mind wanders 46.9 percent of the time.³ In other words, while we are at work, 53.1 percent of the time our mind is on task. The rest of the time it is off task. From a human resource perspective, there is a lot of potential

to be developed here. Even just a small increase in “on-task” time could have a significant improvement in many aspects of work, including productivity, customer service, safety, teamwork, and anything else that would benefit from more focused attention.

Attention is indeed a new variable of performance in business. Traditionally, business productivity has been enhanced through time management, goal setting, prioritization skills, and general qualifications. Attention, in the digital age, is becoming a new enabler of business performance. Welcome to the attention economy.

Researchers have found that the brain has a default way of reacting to the relentless flow of distractions in the digital age: it tries to attend to it all at the same time. It defaults to multitasking. And who wouldn't love to be able to get more accomplished by doing multiple tasks at the same time? Some companies even include “good at multitasking” as a requirement in job descriptions. But when we try to multitask, the research shows, we take more time, make more mistakes, and use up more mental energy.

Multitasking Is a Myth

Most of us carry around the powerful illusion that we can pay attention to more than one thing at a time. We think we can drive a car while talking on the phone, participate in a meeting while checking e-mails, or engage in a conversation while writing a text message. To be clear, we can do many activities without paying attention, that is, without conscious thought. For example, we can walk and talk at the same time. Experienced drivers can handle many of the elements of driving, such as changing gears and turning the wheel, on autopilot.

But from a neurological perspective, we're not capable of focusing attention on two things at the same time. When we think we are multitasking, what we are doing in reality is *shift-tasking*: shifting attention rapidly between two or more things. For example, when talking on the phone while driving, for a second, we're aware of traffic, and then the next second, of the phone. Sometimes we switch so quickly between tasks we have the illusion we're paying attention to both at the same time, but in actuality, we aren't.

The Noncomputational Brain

The term “multitasking” comes from the computer industry and describes a computer’s ability to process several different data sets in parallel. Computers today have no trouble running an Excel spreadsheet, playing a video, sending and receiving e-mails, and scanning for viruses all at the same time. This highlights a big difference between a computer and a human: a computer has several processors, all operating at the same time, while a human has only one brain and a singular attention.

When we have many things we have to get done, many of us try to be efficient and effective by doing more than one thing at a time. The reality is, as amazing and powerful as our brains are, we’re not capable of focusing our attention on two things at the same time.

In the context of multitasking at work, researchers have found that “multitaskers are masters of everything that is irrelevant, they let themselves be distracted by anything.”⁴ Perhaps you’ve experienced losing track of what you are doing even when you have a simple task and clear intentions. For example, say you want to send your mother a gift for her birthday, so you go online to search for something she would like. While searching for books in Amazon, you find a couple books to add to your own wish list. Then you notice a link in one of the book’s comments to an article that looks interesting. You hit that link and start reading, and find a link to a cool video on YouTube. An hour later, you catch yourself still watching videos and have completely lost track of what you started out to do.

Studies have shown that multitasking lowers people’s job satisfaction, damages personal relationships, adversely affects memory, and negatively impacts health.⁵ Many of these studies have demonstrated that multitasking reduces effectiveness because it takes longer to complete tasks and leads to more mistakes. This is because when we switch our focus from one task to another, it takes time to make the shift. Depending on the complexity of the new task, that can take anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes. This phenomenon is called *shift-time*. Shift-time saps our mental energy and taxes our productivity.