

# Taming the Noise:

How Focus and Deep Work Ignite  
Digital Marketing Success



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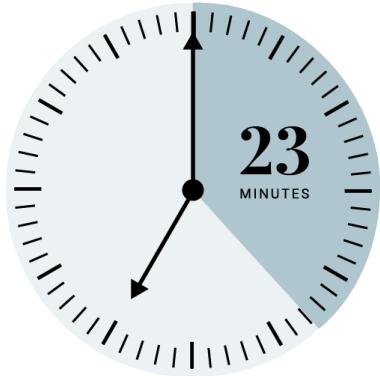
## Executive Summary

The world of digital marketing is one that is fast-paced and demanding on its professionals. Not only are they required in their roles to constantly innovate for their clients, but they are expected to do so in a creative way. However, digital marketers are facing an enormous issue and it is that they are constantly distracted. From bombarding emails and Slack messages to never ending meetings, digital marketers do not have the space to sit down and get into a flow of deep work. This is the kind of dedicated time that allows cutting edge work to flourish. The lack in ability to focus in the digital marketing space in causes stress levels to rise and client approval rates to plummet.

On average, a typical employee is only productive for about [three hours per day](#). The other five hours of the work day is spent on distractions such as; scrolling on social media, reading news websites, and talking to other co-workers about non-work related topics. When a digital marketer does not have the space to think critically about their tasks, it hurts their performance and has a negative impact on campaign quality, innovation, and team efficiency. In the long run this means that the employee will not receive job promotions or be picked first for new projects.

In order to reign in the lost attention spans of digital marketing professionals, key principles of focus, flow, and deep work must be implemented. Work environments should prioritize healthy work habits in order to enable strategic, long-term marketing success. Employers should develop systems that remove constant distractions and harbor mindful settings to encourage deep work to take place. On the flip side, digital marketers themselves should develop strategies to monitor their distractions in order to reduce them to a minimum. So much time is wasted throughout the day by disturbances that can be used as productive work time to push the envelop just a bit more for the client.

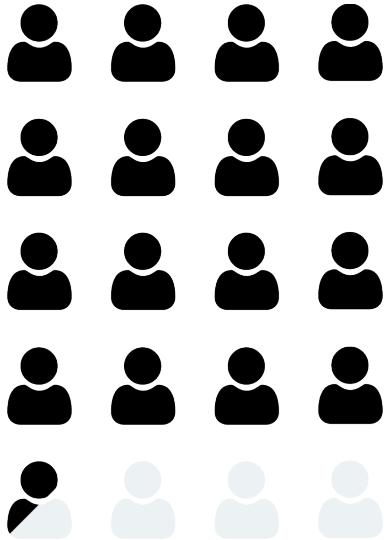
## The Problem of Maintaining Productivity in Digital Marketing



On average, it takes 23 minutes to get back on track after a distraction

The problem plaguing digital marketers is that there is always so much going on and it is hard to find an environment where they have the ability to focus on one task. It always seems like when you just begin to settle in to your to do list, that your phone pings with a new message or a co-worker comes over to ask a question. Professor Michael Posner, at the University of Oregon, found in a recent study that the average time it takes for you to get back on track with a task after being interrupted is twenty-three minutes. Let us say that you are interrupted ten times during your work day - that equals out to about two hundred and thirty minutes of time spent wasted trying to regain your focus. There is so much that could be accomplished in those two hundred and thirty minutes if you were given uninterrupted time to work.

Digital marketers are also expected to juggle multiple projects at a time - that is the nature of the job. However, when handled ineffectively, this can lead to cognitive and creative burnout. Digital marketing professionals handle a wide variety of tasks from SEO optimization to social media management all at the same time. Multitasking, the performance of multiple tasks at the same time, is an inefficient way to get work done. Neuroscience professor Earl Miller, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology says, "You're brain can only produce one or two thoughts" and that we have a "very limited cognitive capacity". (SF, Chapter 1) Does it not seem like when we are trying to do multiple things at once that our thought wheels are spinning, but we are getting nowhere? Our brains are very delicate organs that should be treated with care and not overloaded at all times. Multitasking, or "switching" as it can be called, degrades our focus because we are not allowing enough time for our minds to refocus before moving on to something else. This is when you forget what you are doing, make mistakes, and often feel less creative. Essentially, you are overworking your brain. Studies done by



**83.3% (16.6 out of 20) of marketing and communications professionals have experienced burnout**

[Qatalog](#) and [Cornell University's Idea Lab](#) say that 45% workers feel that frequent switching leaves them feeling less productive and almost half feel the mental strain of moving back and forth between tasks. When you multitask, you think that you are going to get more done because you are handling multiple things at one, but in reality you just get overwhelmed and burnt out too fast.

On a daily basis, digital marketers are exposed to vast amounts of information rapidly. Everything from data analytics to emerging trends and tools can be brought to their attention and it can be a lot to handle. All of this rapid information flying at you can cause cognitive overload and eventually can result in burnout. [Burnout](#) is the feeling of exhaustion when you have too much going on. Signs of burnout include; feeling tired or exhausted, lack of enthusiasm, and an inability to perform at work. Burnout is a serious problem faced by all working professionals, but it is especially apparent in the realm of digital marketing. The information overload that marketing professionals face on a daily basis makes it incredibly hard to stay focused. Imagine that you are a goalie and your entire soccer team is kicking balls at you one after another all at the same time. You probably would not be able to focus on which ball is going to fly at your face next and quickly get tired of trying to block them. This is what the average digital marketer faces so frequently. A constant onslaught of emails, notifications, co-worker interruptions, meetings, and more cause the brain to quickly get tired and feel depleted. The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) reports that [83.3% of marketing and communications professionals](#) have said they have experienced burnout. A digital marketer who feels burnt out is not going to be creating campaigns or solving complex problems that will get the client the results they are looking for.

## The Need for Focus, Flow, and Deep Work

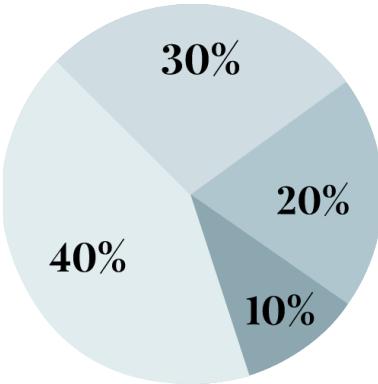
A digital marketer's job is one that requires innovation and deep thinking above all else. They are expected to think and execute on new and exciting ideas that will, in turn, get their clients more business. Ideas cannot be pulled out of a hat at random. Marketing professionals have to assess many factors in order to get the right results. This is why the need for focus, flow, and deep work is crucial in the business of digital marketing.

Having a good ability to focus is the foundation to productivity. Focus refers to the ability to maintain concentration on one task without being distracted. Without clear focus, you would start but not finish so many different tasks. When you keep switching your focus from one task to another you start to develop what is known as "attention residue". [Attention residue](#) is a scientific concept first noted by [Dr. Sophie Leroy](#), from the University of Washington, in 2009. The concept is that when you shift your attention from one task to the next there is a "residue" remaining from the previous tasks that makes it harder to focus on the next one. There are many different techniques that can be incorporated into a digital marketer's day that can improve their focus. For example, they can use the [Pomodoro Technique](#). The Pomodoro Technique was developed by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s and it is defined by completing twenty-five minute periods of focused work and then tasking a five minute break. After four "pomodoros", you can take a fifteen to thirty minute break. It is called the Pomodoro Technique because Cirillo used a tomato shaped kitchen timer to time his sessions. Another great technique to maintain sustained focus on a task is to time-block your calendar. By time-blocking, you are allocating specific time to dedicate to one single task. When a digital marketer remains focused, they produce high quality work, make less mistakes, and complete tasks faster.

In the field of digital marketing, achieving a flow state enhances

creative output. A “[flow state](#)” is defined by being in a mental state where you are completely immersed on a single task or activity. The concept was popularized by leading psychologist [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) in the 1970s. A flow can be achieved in any activity, whether it is rock climbing or writing a paper, the key is that you are doing one single thing or “[monotasking](#)”. In his book [“Stolen Focus: Why You Can’t Pay Attention - and How to Think Deeply Again”](#), author [Johann Hari](#) speaks to Csikszentmihalyi about his research on flow states. Csikszentmihalyi states that while studying a group of painters he noticed that they were not focused on finishing the painting, but rather enthralled by the process of painting itself. When questioning the people that he studied about why they were so focused, Csikszentmihalyi found that many of them said something along the lines of, “I was carried on by the flow”. When it comes to digital marketing, achieving a flow state is critical for creative tasks such as content creation and website design. It is also important to note that in order to achieve a flow state, you must find the balance between your level of skill and challenging that skill. If you are doing something too easy, you will get bored and if you are doing something too hard, you will get frustrated and quit. As a digital marketer, by challenging your skills just enough you will find it very easy to achieve a flow during your workday.

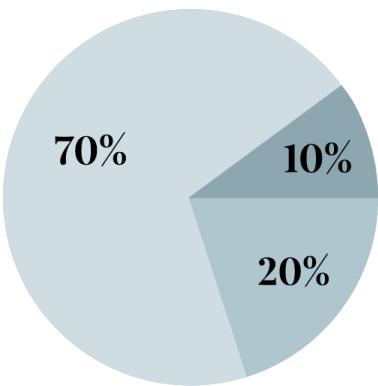
“Deep Work” is a term coined by [Cal Newport](#), author and professor at Georgetown University. It is defined as the ability to focus without distractions on highly demanding tasks. Newport explains that it involves intense and uninterrupted concentration to allow an individual to produce high-quality work in a set period of time. The benefits of deep work, as a whole, include improved productivity, completing complex tasks, and increased creativity. Periods of deep work can also reduce the number of possible errors that can occur, therefore producing an overall better quality product. Their clients are competing to get the most clicks and conversions so the campaigns they are paying their marketing company to run have to be to the highest level possible. Having the ability to do deep work throughout their day is what is going to drive a marketing company to long-term success.



**Hours a Day Developmark Employees Spend Doing Deep Work**

- Less Than 1 Hour
- 1-2 Hours
- 2-3 Hours
- More Than 3 Hours

A poll of ten employees done at [Develomark](#), a digital marketing agency in Southington, CT, says that 70% of the employees feel like they are able to achieve sessions of deep work several times a week. 40% of them said that on an average workday, they are able to get two to three hours of deep focused work done in their eight hour workday. The majority say that personal distractions, like their cells phones and social media, pull them out of their deep focused work. Many of Develomark's employees say that listening to music and finding a secluded work spot in their open office is the best way for them to find their deep, focused flow. When asked about promoting deep work within the company, [Ruan M. Marinho](#), founder of Develomark, says that, "The way I promote deep work throughout my company is by providing the staff the opportunity to work in a hybrid schedule. There is time for strategy when we are in person and then there is time for deep work when we are remote. Based on the data of the poll, I think this model works well for us". By incorporating a hybrid in-office and remote work schedule, Develomark creates an environment dedicated to both collaboration and deep work.



**How Often Employees At Developmark Achieve Deep Work in a Day**

- Several Times a Week
- Daily
- Once a Week

## The Impact of Focus, Flow, and Deep Work on Digital Marketing Success

Having the ability to engage in uninterrupted, focused deep work will positively benefit the industry of digital marketing on many fronts. One of them being higher quality campaigns. By eliminating distractions and enabling detailed attention to tasks, marketing professionals can produce campaigns with more cohesive messaging and better creative designs. [Maven Analytics](#), a data analytics company located in Boston, MA, reports that after blocking off twenty-four hours of their forty hour work week to dedicate to deep work has altered their culture, creativity, and work output for the better. They do not hold any meetings on Monday and Thursdays from 9:00am to 1:00pm and completely blocked off Wednesdays and Fridays from having meetings. During these times they are also off of Slack and are not expected to respond to emails. They only have sixteen hours in their work week that can be dedicated to what they are calling “collab time” where they work together, have meetings, share documents, and connect on Slack. Prior to this schedule, they had tried implementing a single work day for their top four creators to do their focused work and it turned out to be a fail. They realized they had to have all of their employees; instructors, designers, engineers, and video producers, in order for a schedule that prioritizes deep work to work. During their deep work time blocks, their employees are executing their tasks in the ways that allow them to get the best focused work done. During their collaboration periods, employees are meeting with each other, planning, getting status updates, and collaborating. After two quarters of this schedule, Maven has seen more creative and higher outputs and happier employees. John Paurer, partner and CGO of the company, says that the new schedule is a huge win.

Google also encourages their employees to engage in deep work with their [“20% time” initiative](#). This is when employees are able to spend one day a week working on a project that interests them, regardless if it is apart of their normal job responsibilities.

By allowing their employees to take this day, Google is inspiring their team to learn new skills and explore new ideas. Founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page wrote in their IPO letter that, "We encourage our employees, in addition to their regular projects, to spend 20% of their time working on what they think will most benefit Google. This empowers them to be more creative and innovative. Many of our significant advances [like AdSense and Google News] have happened in this manner". Google is benefitting and growing as a company by giving this time to their employees. Instead of hustling to meet their deadlines and putting out subpar work, the employees at Google are staying ahead and growing their expertise with their weekly 20% time.

## How to Implement Focus, Flow, and Deep Work in Digital Marketing

In order for digital marketers to achieve deep work, strategies have to be put in place to get there. Companies can adopt a focus-first work culture where there are scheduled hours in the day dedicated to focused work. This is the time when high-priority tasks, long-term strategy development, and campaign optimization can be completed. The project management software, [Basecamp](#), has created a focus-first culture by scheduling “no meeting” days where their teams are able to work without distractions during main work hours. Another way to induce sessions of deep work is to reduce the amount of internal communication happening within the company. It is critical to silence all notifications, including email and Slack, and keep your calendar free of meetings during a session of deep work. In doing so, you are allowing yourself to settle into that flow. It is also important for digital marketing companies to encourage their employees to focus on one demanding task during their deep work session. For example, using a deep work session to fully design a highly optimized landing page is going to get you further than if you bounced back and forth between different creative tasks. You will end the session feeling as if you have used your resources to their fullest potential rather than feeling drained from task switching. Also, leveraging technology to support productivity is an extremely helpful method to engage in deep work. Using task management softwares, such as [Asana](#) and [Trello](#), help to prioritize work more efficiently. Successful deep work in digital marketing can be measured on both individual and team level metrics through overall campaign effectiveness and client satisfaction.

## Mastering Focus, Flow, and Deep Work for Digital Marketing Success

Digital marketing is an ever-changing industry. So much goes on in one day that it can be difficult for its professionals to feel like they have their heads on straight. By adopting principles of focus, flow, and deep work, they can revolutionize their productivity. Without it, companies like Maven Analytics and Google would not have the productive teams they have now. If Google did not implement their 20% time, we would not have Google Adsense which is a critical tool that many digital marketers use to get their clients more business. There is nothing wrong with companies starting small; like blocking off one or two hours a day to dedicate to deep work. Changing the workflow is not something that will be perfect overnight. It will take trial and error to find the happy medium of collaboration and deep work, but it is critical to implement a focused workflow to produce high quality campaigns and to effectively meet client requests. Digital marketing leaders must adopt these practices to keep up with the demands of modern digital marketing.

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