

The Distracted Worker

Productivity and Personal Effectiveness in the Age of Social Media

Executive summary

Smartphones have almost become a physical extension of our identities, connecting us to the social networks that inform our awareness of the world, shaping our perceptions of reality and self-esteem. The consequences for business can no longer be ignored:

- In 2020, 97% of UK adults aged 16-54 owned a smartphone ¹
- In the UK, 71% of all measured time spent online was on smartphones ²
- In the West we check our phones 96 times a day, for 18–24-year-olds the rate is much higher ³

On average, British people spend 2 hours 34 minutes online on their smartphones. The problem is, we're using tech we don't fully understand. The 38 days a year we spend on smartphones ⁴ is adversely affecting our cognition. ⁵

In their book *The Distracted Mind* Neuroscientists Adam Gazzaley and psychologist Larry D. Rosen reveal what happens in our brains when we get interrupted or distracted and how it affects us behaviourally and psychologically. They explain how internet-connected devices, with their expectation of an immediate response to all communication, degrades our attention. This has implications not just for productivity, but also for mental health and stress levels in the workplace. ⁶

For 10 years, I've been studying the impact of smartphones and social media on emotional and social wellbeing at work. This was prompted by observing a significant change in the behaviour of my clients, caused by the substitution of interpersonal relationships for what is now known as 'Computer Mediated Communication'.

I pinpoint below four key areas of psychological erosion which are caused by smartphones and are almost certainly affecting the productivity and wellbeing of your company:

1) Attention and Deep Thinking – As revealed above by Rosen and Gazzaley, our relationship with smartphones has worn away our ability to concentrate. In turn this has affected people's productivity at work. Smartphones deliver information in a way that's fast, fun and informal. But they encourage us to scan rather than read, glance rather than absorb and rush when we write. Virginia Clinton, professor of Education, Health and Behaviour at the University of North Dakota puts it this way, "If you're reading from paper, your mind thinks, 'This is something important. I need to pay attention to it!'" ⁷

¹ <https://www.finder.com/uk/mobile-internet-statistics>

² Ofcom, Online Nation, 2020 Report https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/196407/online-nation-2020-report.pdf

³ <https://www.asurion.com/about/press-releases/americans-check-their-phones-96-times-a-day/>

⁴ <https://www.finder.com/uk/mobile-internet-statistics>

⁵ University of North Carolina neurologist Dan Kaufer, MD Fellow of the American Academy of Neurology, and former President of the Society for Behavioural and Cognitive Neurology

⁶ *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World*, The MIT Press, 2016

⁷ Evidence increases for reading on paper instead of screens – The Hechinger Report, August 2019

2) **Critical Thinking** – In the era of ‘always on’ and information overload we are losing the ability to assess information based on evidence because we are being railroaded into ‘Fast Thinking’ (see below). Influenced by our social networks, we favour peer pressure, short cuts, and emotion. This habit is impacting how we solve problems at work, with negative consequences for the business.

3) **Mental Health** – The mental health statistics for Generation Z and Millennials are sobering⁸. The damage to wellbeing using metrics such as levels of depression, loneliness⁹, anxiety, poor self-esteem and narcissism is growing. Companies urgently need to understand that external factors are affecting your workforce in a negative way, according to a study at Open-sourced Workplace¹⁰. The overuse, and sometimes misuse of social media could affect the overall operation of the company and could pose risks to the reputation of the employers and their business.

4) **Interpersonal Communication**

Most social media platforms deliberately encourage us to make simple and impulsive decisions at speed, relying solely on immediate Fast Brain responses. Responding quickly, we can like or ignore, support or reject, share or skip. However, the business world is full of complexity and requires multi-faceted skills.

In his 2011 book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*¹¹, Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman examines two modes of thought:

Fast Thinking: helps the brain to save time, where responses are fast, impulsive and automatic, applying to most of our decisions on a day-to-day basis.

Slow Thinking: where considered responses are thoughtful and deliberate. These take more time and energy but benefits from detailed evaluation by the mind and so is more reliable. It looks at the bigger picture and tends to overrule the temptation to give a fast response.

The challenge for employers is that thinking styles are being shaped automatically through online activity as our neuroplasticity changes. This can affect concentration, empathy, and critical thought, all essentials for any thriving business.

Fast Thinking is the gateway to inferior critical thinking and leaves a business operation open to various psychological flaws that naturally reside in our evolutionary makeup such as Cognitive Biases, Magical Thinking, Memory Flaws and Fallacious Thinking. If not fully understood, these flaws can lead to poor decision making, degraded empathy for outgroups and low mental health outcomes.

These are all solvable problems. To find out more I'd be delighted to arrange a Zoom call. I can be reached by P: +447796 773 366 or E: nick@commcrunch.com

⁸ Frontiers in Psychiatry | Addictive Disorders: The Psychology of Addictive Smartphone Behaviour in Young Adults: Problematic Use, Social Anxiety, and Depressive Stress

⁹ A fifth of UK adults say they have only one or no close friends)This proportion has tripled in a decade; Onward/Stack Data Strategy

¹⁰ <https://www.opensourcedworkplace.com/news/25-problems-with-social-media-in-the-workplace-employee-and-employer-adverse-effects>

¹¹ Thinking Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman, published by Penguin in May 2012