Mindful Technology:

Banishing Digital Distractions

An overview of #MindfulTech19

Claire Carter, Academic Liaison Librarian, University of Bedfordshire

claire.carter@beds.ac.uk

"Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day" Mark Twain

I am easily distracted: people, my 'phone, email, chocolate, the washing up or the contents of the fridge take on increasing importance when I have a list of things that "have" to be done. Home was the cleanest it has ever been whilst I was writing my Masters dissertation. Therefore, a recent MMiT event - Mindful Technology – was particularly pertinent to my situation.

In a nutshell, five top tips and lessons learned for getting the "To Do list" done:

1. Eat the frog, do the worst thing first
2. Embrace the Pomodoro time management technique (iterations of strict twenty five minute blocks of performing a task interspersed with short breaks)
3. Create a work group (and combine with #2), as you're less likely to slack off in front of people
4. Change your environment. Why can't you work outside or find a quieter room?
5. Grow a tree whilst you work. Use apps like Forest to prevent digital distraction and keep you focused on a task whilst helping the environment

Four speakers presented a useful mix of practical tips, tools and techniques to overcome digital distractions, alongside deeper conversations on why and how we interact with the digital world and how that impacts on our identities.

There are apps built into your mobile device that enable you to see how much time you are spending online; others are available for download. OFFTIME can help keep you focused on a task by enabling you to set parameters on online availably, effectively blocking out notifications and alerts during specific periods of the day. The app offers "space to breathe in our hyper-connected world." Evernote and Scoop.it! enable you to curate and organise items of interest to be read later rather than diverting your attention when you're on the job. All of these applications have their benefits and potential for helping manage your work life. None of these will work, however, without a degree of self-restraint and will power.

Andy Tattersall offered advice on 20 Ways to Beat Digital Distraction. Declutter your email. Unsubscribe from mailing lists. Compartmentalise and diarise your time to make tasks more achievable. Find quieter places to work (maybe get back to nature and work outside). Then there's THAT frog. Doing the least compelling task first gets it out of the way and your day will only improve. It needs doing anyway so why fret about it for any length of time. Easier said than done I know, but still something to aim for.

The Forest app is an ingenious feel good antidote to 'phone addiction. You can plant a virtual sapling, and it will thrive into a big tree as long as you abstain from checking your mobile. If you don't stay focused the sapling will wither. Forest also awards abstention by funding the planting of real trees based on the credits you accrue. DreamLab, is another example of an app that promotes wellbeing whilst keeping you off your 'phone. When you charge your mobile during the night while you sleep it puts the device to work number crunching research data with the mantra: 'Charge. Sleep. Fight cancer.'

Antony Groves expounded the central theme of mindfulness during his presentation; the notion of digital wellness; balancing work and life. If we used our devices mindfully, we'd be in control of when we use them and how we use them. Are apps that incentivise and control our use of devices necessary in this context?

David White argued that the debate was less about the need to disconnect, but more about self-control. "We aren't addicted to our 'phones. We are addicted to being social." It is essential that we utilise our devices mindfully to control our "digital destiny." During his presentation he articulated the continuum of "visitor" and "resident" modes when we are online. It is possible to be both, but probably detrimental to be actively engaging as a resident online all of the time. Passive online visiting, lurking can be beneficial. In a professional capacity, individuals can learn from lectures or discussion threads simply by reading, listening and absorbing them, for example. However, is there any real benefit in voyeuristically scrolling through Facebook every night before you go to sleep? Does this activity serve a purpose, or could it be replaced with a more beneficial activity?

Social media provides a positive opportunity to define yourself personality and self online; but the negative effects of relentlessly chasing retweets, likes and loves, is well documented. David also drew a link between this online persona and the anxiety caused by dwindling device batteries. A dead battery not only results in a temporary loss of communication, but also a feeling of losing a part of yourself. Food for thought.

"Questioning why you agree with something is more valuable that bolstering your views on what you disagree with."

David concluded with this challenge. The commentary around fake news is prevalent and although I was aware that there was a bubble that algorithms created, feeding individuals only information they thought they would like to hear, I had never placed myself in that gullible category. After listening to David's presentation, I realise that I'm as guilty of this as anybody else. I will take up the challenge to seek out opinions on subjects and debates that are contrary to my views and try and create a more balanced social media feed.

Sue Thomas closed the afternoon by introducing the concept of [Technobiophila](#). She argued that we don't need less technology but more interaction with nature in order to balance it. Research into the benefits of getting outside and communing with nature is well documented. The [biophilia hypothesis](#) articulates why taking your work outside might be beneficial. Sue introduced less well-known research which is proving that virtual nature can also promote a sense of wellbeing just much as the real thing. [Technobiophilia](#) – "How to feel better without logging off" - explains why so many of us have nature screensavers and images on our PCs and other devices boosting our mood whilst we work. Sue believes that we can design our own lives to be integrated with the digital world, but only to an extent that suits us personally. For example, scheduling an outdoor or walking meeting can be supplemented by using apps such as [Plum Village](#), to encourage mobile device-based meditation. Technology can help promote mindfulness and wellbeing, in conjunction with nature. Balance is the key.

See:[#MindfulTech2019](#)