

Is There a Cure for the 'Distraction Virus'?

By [Mike Elgan](#)

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We all want to succeed in our careers. We go to school for at least 16 years. We study late at night to pass exams and get certifications. We take on-the-job training, and try to teach ourselves new skills. We attend industry conferences to build our knowledge and cultivate peer contacts. We read productivity books and blogs, and try to get more work done in less time. We work nights sometimes, and weekends. Success is important to us.

And then along comes YouTube, the agent of our destruction. And FaceBook. And BoingBoing. And Slashdot. And Digg. And Fark, the Drudge Report, Neatorama, Apple's Movie Trailers page, eBay, Flickr -- (I get paid by the word, so I'll just keep going) -- Break.com, Wikipedia, Craigslist, Amazon.com. Google, for crying out loud. (This is a reputable web site, so I won't mention porn, online poker and extreme-video sites.)

Whenever we've got something boring, unappealing or difficult to do, we know that passive, easy, fun, interesting and compelling content is just a click away.

The Internet is an incredible productivity tool that offers unprecedented access to information and communication with others. But it's also distracting. *Really* distracting. More alarmingly, it's getting increasingly distracting every day.

In [a recent blog post](#), essayist, programmer, and programming language designer Paul Graham offered the profound insight that Internet-based distraction "is not a static obstacle that you avoid like you might avoid a rock in the road. Distraction seeks you out." And "as we learn to avoid one class of distractions, new ones constantly appear, like drug-resistant bacteria."

He also points out that distraction and work look and sometimes even feel the same. You've been at your computer for six hours straight. How much of that was productive work, and how much amusement? It's hard to say, accurately. If Internet-based distractions threaten our ability to get our work done and succeed in our careers, if they seek us out, and if they evolve like viruses to become more compelling and addictive, what does that mean?

Here's what it means:

1. We're not "preparing kids for the future." There is a strong push worldwide to "prepare kids for the future" by installing Internet-connected PCs in schools. Part of this effort is to bridge the "digital divide" between rich and poor. But maybe growing up without video games and a PC in your room is an advantage. Maybe the "have nots" will be better equipped than the "haves" to face the distraction super-virus of the future because they won't become addicted as children to the Internet-distraction impulse.

I have an Indian friend -- an overachieving genius type -- who graduated at the top of his class at IIT (Indian Institutes of Technology) and for the last decade has been launching startups in Silicon Valley. He now has two young kids of his own, who he hopes will follow in his footsteps. When he was growing up in Bangalore in the '70s and '80s, he had no Internet distractions and nothing all that compelling on TV or on the radio. Teens didn't have their own cars, or shopping malls to hang out at. All his cultural influences were -**1. We're not "preparing kids for the future."** There is a strong push worldwide to "prepare kids for the future" by installing Internet-connected PCs in schools. Part of this effort is to bridge the "digital divide" between rich and poor. But maybe growing up without video games and a PC in your room is an advantage. Maybe the "have nots" will be better equipped than the "haves" to face the distraction super-virus of the future because they won't become addicted as children to the Internet-distraction impulse.

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His kids will grow up in another world, one with Xbox 3,060 (complete with virtual reality helmet), 5,000 channels on TV, friends video-texting their holographic cell phones in the middle of the night – and inconceivably addictive distractions online. What will it take for his kids to succeed the way he did? Will they even want to? And who had the better “preparation for the future”?

2. Training needs to include distraction coping mechanisms. Company training programs teach applications, and sometimes even productivity. But maybe it's time to institute training programs that explicitly help people cope with online distractions.

3. Productivity means nothing if time gained is squandered. Wonderful productivity blogs like Lifehacker, 43 Folders, Web Worker Daily, Get Rich Slowly, Zen Habits and others serve to transmit productivity ideas to those who care. But what good is productivity if time saved ends up being squandered on pointless distractions? For every five minutes we save on some new productivity technique, we need to figure out how to spend that five minutes productively or meaningfully or we've gained nothing.

4. We need to evolve our personal methods for coping with distraction, or the distractions win. Think of how distracting the Internet was 15 years ago -- in 1993 -- compared to now. (The answer: Not very.) Now try to imagine how distracting it will be 15 years from now. Each new Web 2.0 site, social network and video streaming site represents another assault on our ability to focus on productive work. How compelling, addictive and distracting will the Web 3.0, 4.0 and 5.0 be? The techniques you succeed with today may not be good enough for tomorrow. We need to evolve constantly.

5. The individual, the company, the nation that is best at avoiding distractions in the future will have an enormous advantage in the competitive marketplace. Think about the obesity problem. A century ago, America had the world's healthiest population, tallest people and best food. Fast forward to today. The quality of food has declined as the quantity has increased. Now 60 percent of Americans are overweight, and a quarter clinically obese. And low-quality food is also making us shorter. What happened?

The marketing of food -- advertising, packaging, brand development -- evolved like a virus. Our food-industrial complex learned to seduce us into radical over-consumption. This evolution outpaced our defenses against it. Kids are addicted to sugar, artificial flavors and junk-food brands before they're even old enough to ride a bike. Adults compulsively consume packaged, processed foods despite daily warnings in the news about their ill effects. The junk food virus is literally killing us.

Is this where Internet distractions are taking us? Is there an intellectual or mental “obesity epidemic” on the horizon? Are we there already?

I don't know the answers to these questions, but I've got a bad feeling that the evolving - online distraction virus is an underappreciated threat that nobody is really dealing with.

Is there a cure? Probably not. But the first step -- as with any addiction -- is to recognized that we've got a problem.