

INSPIRING BETTER  
WORK HABITS,  
FOCUSING  
YOUR TEAM,  
AND GETTING STUFF  
DONE IN THE  
CONSTANTLY  
CONNECTED  
WORKPLACE

CAN I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION?

**CURT STEINHORST**

with Jonathan McKee

**WILEY**



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*To Rand and Reed.*

*The moment you came into the world, you brought it all into focus.  
You will always have my attention.*





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# FOREWORD

This may sound crazy, but I love chaos. I love noise. We all do. But noise is terrible for focus. Focus matters. The what, when, and why of focus shapes every part of our life. In a world where no one can focus on anything, being capable of it is an increasingly critical and unorthodox differentiator.

If you were to read my resume, the last thing you would think is “this guy is focused.” I’ve always had an unorthodox approach to business and life in general. I have had a rap career (YouTube Jesse Jaymes for proof). I cofounded a private jet company that we sold to Warren Buffett. I partnered on a coconut water venture that was bought by Coca-Cola. Most recently, I hired a Navy SEAL to live with my family and wrote a book about the journey called *Living with a SEAL*.

Regardless of the optics, focusing on what’s important is perhaps the single guiding tenant of every major life decision and stage. Life is too short to waste it on the unimportant. Yet the potential for distraction is always there for me. And I’ve fallen into that trap many times. I still do. That’s why I recently went to live in a monastery. To get away from all the distractions. To shut off all the noise. However, living in a monastery isn’t a realistic solution for most of us. That’s what I love about the book you have in your hands.

Curt Steinhorst was introduced to me as someone who could help me focus my speech messages. He, in turn, helped me focus what I stand for. He is thoughtful. Not only as someone who has thrived in the distraction age—founding four successful start-up companies, speaking internationally on distraction and leadership—but as someone who has wrestled with the beast of distraction his entire life. Curt is not merely showing us how to cope. He knows distraction. Curt has not only had to overcome ADD, he has learned to overcome ADD in a time when the entire world has become immediately available, and he, in turn, immediately available to the world. Curt has not only learned

to manage the demands of constant connection and technology, he has overcome them.

I like to encourage others: March to the beat of your own bongo drum. *Can I Have Your Attention?* is pioneering a new mindset. It's far too easy to let the noise of the world dictate the futures of our family, organization, community, and personal life. We can and must make intentional decisions about where we focus our attention, and put it toward the important things. That starts with you. I often remind others that they must cut the pie before sharing it. Take control of your time. You'll be surprised how much time you have to give to your family, your friends, your business when you eliminate the nonessentials. This book helps us get there.

Your business is a reflection of you. The better you are, the better your business will be. What's unique about *Can I Have Your Attention?* is that its concern is not so much distraction as it is the reason why we can't stay focused. Curt's goal isn't to create attention obsessed drones. With his eyes toward industry leaders and professionals, his goal is to help others become "Focus Wise"; to help leaders, professionals, spouses, and siblings reclaim their ability to focus.

In other words, no need to move in to the monastery full time. *Can I have Your Attention?* has the answers we need today.

*Jesse Itzler*

New York Times bestselling author  
of "Living With a SEAL",  
Co-Founder of Marquis Jet  
and an owner of the Atlanta Hawks.

# PROLOGUE: YOU DON'T HAVE JACK

## POPULAR HARRY

Everyone at work loves Harry, and it's easy to see why. He responds right away, at all hours (when does the guy sleep?) and in all places (including vacation, if necessary). "Team player" isn't strong enough to describe him. No one in his office makes phone calls anymore, but if they did, there's little doubt he would pick up.

Harry is the ideal of reachability in the digital age. Harry is a digital saint.

At 9 AM on Wednesday, Harry tackles a major case study due Friday. He's starting a day early, leaving nothing to chance.

By the third line, Harry stops midstroke. He needs Rachel's numbers from yesterday. After a quick Control S, he switches to e-mail and finds, among the 74 messages waiting there, an invite for a department meeting this afternoon. Is he even available?

Switching to his calendar, Harry sees "Vegas." He winces. The trip is only two weeks away, and he hasn't arranged travel yet. But Harry isn't just responsive; he's also responsible, which means he can't book a flight now . . . not without comparing prices (on a site that aggregates airlines and fares—only it's weird to him that they point to competing sites . . . or maybe they just *used* to be competitors? Convenience or a monopoly? This really nags at Harry).

Off the calendar and on to his browser to scan prices. He could swear one of the companies used a pitchman from the old *Star Trek* series. Harry's dad loved *Star Trek*, which reminds him that he needs to find the J.J. Abrams reboot on Netflix. Or is it on Amazon? He opens two new tabs to check—not on *either*? But there's nothing else to watch! His girlfriend hates when he says, "Get whatever," so he finds the trailer to a recent rom-com, which he then purchases on iTunes.

Thirty-five minutes later, Harry has booked a flight, watched three trailers, texted movie suggestions to his girlfriend, and added some shows he's heard about to their Netflix and Amazon lists. Now he can return to what he was doing.

What was he doing? Right, the case study.

Let's see, he was right about at . . . *the very beginning*.

## ENIGMATIC JACK

I'd introduce you to Jack in person, but he's not available at the moment.

In fact, no one's been able to reach him for an hour or so. He's not answering e-mails, texts, or IMs. Some of his colleagues have even resorted to—brace yourself—looking up his work number and *dialing* it. Still nothing.

His colleagues have questions and issues they want addressed now. He needs to pay for his Girl Scout Cookies order. Why doesn't he ever come to the break room? The water cooler bottle is empty, and Cheryl keeps trying to hoist a new one into place. People want Jack's sign-off, his buy-in, his prompt *acknowledgment*.

So, where is Jack?

To be fair, Jack isn't taking an extended lunch or slipping out for a movie. You can find him in his office, or "vault," as he calls it. If you could look behind his closed door (guarded by a sign that says, "Let's catch up—later"), you wouldn't see him typing, tweeting, or texting. Instead, Jack leans back in his chair with his eyes open and fixed on nothing in particular, as though he's been thinking about something for a while.

If you want to break into Jack's vault, you have to do so in person. That might mean driving to his building, riding in an elevator, asking for directions to his office, then taking a deep breath as you prepare to knock (assuming the sign on his door doesn't dissuade you, which is clearly Jack's intention).

A colleague—or even worse, an employee—who reduces you to knocking?

Jack is an enigma in the digital age—reachable, but certainly not conveniently. Jack is a digital sinner.

And one more thing: Jack—everyone reluctantly agrees—is the most productive employee in the company.

## **SPOILER ALERT: HARRY WORKS FOR YOU**

Maybe your “Harry” is a Stuart or a Lisa. Regardless of the name, the spirit of Harry and his distractions haunt your office. You have a Harry problem.

As his boss, you might be too busy to comprehend the saga of his wasted time and energy. Remember how Harry started early, “leaving nothing to chance”? In reality, he’d left everything to chance. It’s why he stayed up nights scrambling against the deadline to finish his case study.

But when you read it, all is apparently right with the world. The work is delivered in typical Harry fashion. The numbers are accurate, the visuals helpful, the results actionable. Nice work from an employee whose talents have not disappointed you.

But they should disappoint you. Harry is robbing both you and himself.

What you don’t know *does* hurt you—and your organization too. Nobody, including Harry, has a clue how far his potential could take him. What sort of case study could he have produced if he’d taken a page (actually, several) from Jack’s book, eliminating distractions and sustaining a deep level of focus? On a larger scale, how much further along would he be professionally if this example wasn’t a microcosm of his entire career?

But let’s stop picking on Harry for a moment.

After all, he’s just following the script of a typically distracted person in today’s constantly connected workplace. His portrait is sketched from facts and supported by study after study.

U.S. adults spend 2.9 to 4.7 hours per day on smartphones alone.<sup>1</sup> Throw in TV, computers, and other forms of entertainment media and

technology, and we clock in as many as 12 hours.<sup>2</sup> The average adult is awake only 15 hours a day. When are we exercising, meeting a friend for coffee, or playing with our children?

In homes nationwide, adults stare at a TV, teenagers stream video on smartphones, and toddlers flick colored shapes across tablets. If the dog is lucky, he has a treadmill because no one is walking him.

The overwhelming majority of us spend more time looking at screens than talking with our partners. And 88 percent of us actively engage with a second screen while watching TV.<sup>3</sup> We can't even remain focused on the device that used to be blamed for attention deficit disorder.

Why should you care what Harry does on his own time? Because his own time, and waste of it, bleeds into yours.

## **WHAT JACK'S REALLY DOING**

Jack's phone is silent and out of sight, and though his laptop is open, he doesn't let it interrupt him. Put your ear to his door: You probably won't hear much. If you could peek inside, he might resemble the most useless and unproductive person in the building.

But Jack is far from that.

Since he closed his door an hour ago and politely but firmly asked the world to wait, Jack has been hatching an idea that could revolutionize how his company approaches the market. And since he learned to focus this way two years ago, he's been discovering pockets of potential and levels of ingenuity he never knew he had.

Every morning when Jack steps across the threshold of his vault, he becomes a different person. Even the sound of the latch clicking behind is a minor thrill. The devices he now stashes away without thought become, through his mastery of them, tools of focus instead of implements of distraction. The quote above his desk, from Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, is printed on yellowing paper but remains ever fresh:

"Tell me what you pay attention to, and I will tell you who you are."



Few words have done more to free up Jack's thinking. He likes to compare his job to spelunking into an uncharted cave, anticipating the depths he'll test and explore—in this case, the depths of his creativity and productivity.

Unlike the hunt for stalactites, this is no dedicated hobby. It's a work style made possible by a lifestyle that Jack embraces every day. Despite all his practice, it still takes a few minutes for Jack's senses to adjust to the sudden shift in worlds. But the relative silence and isolation don't unnerve him anymore.

By conventional workplace wisdom, these qualities compound Jack's sins. But to those who benefit from his work, he's a saint. Jack shines as a unique source of insight—that rare person who executes his ideas. And somehow he does this while leaving the office at a reasonable hour, unlike colleagues who spend more time at work but actually accomplish less.

Honestly, that guy. No one seems to know how he does it.

People like Jack swim against the current of mainstream thought—and may be the only real solution for organizations beset by increasing distraction and decreasing productivity. In this book, we'll build a case for why these employees are the most valuable assets of the digital age. And how you can help your own people become like him.

Jack isn't immune to the perils of the constantly connected workplace. What makes him exceptional is his capacity to block out noise and accomplish focused work. If you have one or more Jacks in your office, congratulations. More likely, you depend principally on Harry and his tribe. That's probably why you picked up this book in the first place.

## **WHAT THIS BOOK WILL DO FOR YOU**

This book is for people who know they, their employees, and their organizations can be more productive but aren't sure how to get there. It's dedicated to harvesting our most precious, and dwindling, resource: attention. The digital age has no unique claim to the problem

of focus. Everyone from Seneca to Shakespeare has wrestled with it. But they didn't have smartphones, Instagram, Facebook, e-mail, Netflix, or any of the other marvels (or scourges) that constantly challenge our focus today.

And I do mean “our” focus. I was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) as a child. Distraction is the way my brain likes to work—whether I like it or not. The systems and strategies I recommend in this book started with a test subject of one.

As a father of two, I am woefully familiar with the difficult questions parents face related to connectivity and work-life balance. I am personally invested in the outcome of how we prepare the next generation for work and work for the next generation.

I run a business. I lead a team that wrestles with efficiency and empathy in the age of constant connectivity. We work with clients who expect immediate responses.

Perhaps the only difference: I've devoted my career, education, thought space, and financial resources to this challenge—so much so that I've coined a term to describe the goal of turning our attention resources into productivity. *Focus-wise* is what we should strive for, in work and in life. And I don't just believe this; I've made it a cornerstone of my business.

Focus wisdom is the difference between the strain of Harry and the satisfaction of Jack, between surrendering to distraction and mastering it. Between managing employees and inspiring them. Focus wisdom is a blueprint for organizational success.

## WHERE WE'RE HEADED

This book is broken into seven sections, each section representing an aspect of the workplace that is affected by distraction. They can be read in sequence or mixed and matched to suit your needs:

- Section 1, *Nobody's Working*, outlines the nature of distraction in the constantly connected workplace, its hidden costs, and how we can start to address it.

- Section 2, *Finding Focus*, discusses the possibilities and limitations of our brain's ability to focus, including surprising truths about multitasking.
- Section 3, *Focus-Wise Space* makes a case for walls (literal and figurative) as a path to focus and explains the secret to Jack's success: the vault.
- Section 4, *Focus-Wise Technology*, describes our love-hate relationship with tech, how it can help promote focus, and the pros and cons of monitoring your people.
- Section 5, *Focus-Wise Communication*, unpacks the shortcomings of digital communication and how face-to-face connection can make all the difference.
- Section 6, *Focus-Wise Workday*, presents an alternative to the myth of work-life balance, explores useful delineation and delegation, and offers tips for extending focus and capacity.
- Section 7, *Focus-Wise Leadership* explores three questions to determine proper focus, the secret of a focus culture, training that works, the power of emotional engagement, and the surprising cure for employee boredom.

## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Although shorter is better for a book like this, useful things can be left out. That's why I've provided a host of helpful resources for you at [focuswise.com/book](http://focuswise.com/book). Here you can consult a constantly updated repository of expanded content and practical advice.

If you're like me, you may want some personal and professional high-level *reflection* as you dive in. Journaling has been a tremendous way for me to begin and end each of my days in a focused way. There are reflection questions for every chapter at [focuswise.com/book](http://focuswise.com/book).

Plus, I have created a deep-dive video for each of the seven sections, providing a strategic way to frame *discussion* with your team about that section's content. Let's be honest—few people read more than 140 characters these days. Perhaps gathering to watch the video together will help start needed conversations within your team.

From there, I hope they pick up/download a copy of this book themselves! In fact, check out the intro video as soon as you finish reading the prologue.

Finally, I know many of us are ready for practical solutions to this well-known (and personally played out) problem of distraction. You want ground-level resources to begin *implementation* of focus-wise solutions within your team or organization. Thus, you will also find pertinent and actionable resources specific to each section at [www.focuswise.com/book](http://www.focuswise.com/book).

What we are asking you to do in this book isn't easy: to rethink virtually every aspect of work today. From how you lead, hire, and train to how you run your meetings and even set up your office space. We are asking you to do the hard work so your people have a fighting chance to reclaim their focus and thrive in the constantly connected workplace.

The good news is it's more possible—and way more valuable—than you might think.

The power of true focus awaits you and your people. Together, we'll learn how to cultivate and maintain it.

SECTION ONE

**NOBODY'S  
WORKING**



## CHAPTER 1

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# *The Curse of the Overwhelmed*

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**T**wenty-two.

That's how many e-mails have arrived in the past 15 minutes as I've tried to write this opening. And because I indulged the temptation to check, I'll work longer and get less done today. I probably won't even realize it.

Been here before? Know someone who has?

You're not alone. Ask your people how work is going and you'll hear:

*I'm burning it at both ends.*

*So much on my plate, it's crazy.*

*Putting in 14-hour days.*

Sure, people feel overworked, but that's not the problem. We confuse busyness and activity with actual work, so what feels like *overworked* is actually *overwhelmed*. What's the difference? To find out, let's go back to my inbox.

Of those 22 e-mails, three were from employees, one was from a client, one was from a prospect, and five were newsletters or promotions.

The other 12? They were from people who were supposed to be working. *But weren't.*

These are friends who work in fields like consulting, accounting, medicine, journalism, and software sales, sending messages such

as, “Where did you buy that Ninja blender?” at 10:30 AM on a Tuesday. Twelve out of 22 isn’t bad—one study says 86 percent of the e-mails we get aren’t critical for work.<sup>1</sup>

## HEY, I’M DOING MY JOB

Most people don’t think distractions affect their productivity. They are distracted, they say, but they still get to what needs to be done. As someone who has studied distraction for years, I can tell you that very few people are honest about its cost in their lives, and almost none have realistic strategies to overcome it. They think they’re working harder and more efficiently than ever. *But they’ve never actually worked less.*

Since 2007 (the same year, notably, that the iPhone was released), the decline in employee productivity has been staggering. One efficiency expert says we can lose more than six hours a day to interruptions.<sup>2</sup> Another estimates that these interruptions waste 28 billion hours a year, costing the U.S. economy nearly \$1 trillion.<sup>3</sup> A different study about multitasking—a mantra for many employers—found that it costs the economy \$450 billion annually.<sup>4</sup>

While productivity has plummeted, connectivity—the extent to which we have access to one another—hasn’t.

And with all that constant connection, the borders between work and life are crumbling.

In one survey, 87 percent of employees admitted to reading political social media posts at work.<sup>5</sup> Other research shows that 60 percent of all online purchases occur between 9 AM and 5 PM and that 70 percent of U.S. porn viewing also happens during working hours<sup>6</sup> (“working” from home?). And if none of that convinces you, perhaps this will: Facebook’s busiest hours are 1 to 3 PM—right in the middle of the workday.

So maybe it’s not surprising when the latest Gallup poll finds that the majority of employees worldwide aren’t engaged in their work.<sup>7</sup>

And yet all these studies might only scratch the surface, relying as they do on the perceptions of people who want to think they’re



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working. How much time do *you* actually spend on uninterrupted work? How much time do your people?

Yet it's hard to imagine returning to a time when employees like Harry were less accessible and lacked powerful tools at their fingertips 24/7. In truth, we love being able to reach the Harrys in our lives anytime, anywhere. You can call or e-mail him. You can chat via IM because he's usually active. You can text, tweet, or even tap him on the shoulder, since he's probably nearby. No matter your method, he'll respond right away—which is why so many of his colleagues consider him a saint.

But whether those who depend on him know it or not, Harry is far from sainthood when it comes to productivity. Harry commits sins of omission. He fails to accomplish even half of what he's capable of. Although he may get high marks, his actual value has never been lower.

It's easy to blame the employees. But I've got some hard news: The problem is with you.

