

WTS-LA Chapter President, Kathy Simons - May Letter



Kathy Simons (WTS-LA Chapter President), Photo © John Livzey, 2018

I'm sorry, you were saying what exactly...

Nobel prize-winning economist Herbert Simon said, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." Let me say that one more time, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." Guess what—he said that in 1971! Before cable television! Before the Internet! Before smartphones! Before Twitter, Alexa, Google Assistant, and whatever other soon-to-be-released tech that will bombard our brains on a minute-by-minute basis tomorrow. I need a rest just thinking about it. Imagine what Smith would think today, if he could take a moment to stop and think about it. But after all, that's the point. We are relentlessly besieged by a wealth of information that constantly fights for our attention. But what are we supposed to do, turn them all off? Okay, let's not lose our heads. I still need Waze to get home...

Writer Robert C. Gallagher said, "Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine." And he's right. There is no walking back of technology, probably even vending machine technology. No one is giving up their smartphones and, lord knows, whatever the next advancement may be. They shouldn't. Besides, it's not about the tech. It's about us and how we handle tech and every change it brings. It has always been about us. I'm sure when Gutenberg introduced the printing press in 1439, there were critics who bemoaned its benefits and cried, "Well, there goes our oral tradition!" So, we can't blame tech as the cause for our inability to focus. It's time for us to take responsibility and take a good long look at ourselves.

True focus is an exercise of willpower and restraint. But it's deceptively hard. And it has become completely normalized to split focus, so much so, in fact, that we don't even notice it anymore. How many of us talk on the phone while driving? Text while walking? Play Minesweeper while in a meeting? I think it's absolutely impossible for my friend's son to do anything without watching a YouTube video. And while driving in our fair city, I once saw a man eating an entire full-course breakfast as he drove down the 101 Freeway, complete with silverware, a newspaper, and the crossword. Focus, people. It's about focus.

Our technology makes it easy to do two or more things at once. But just because it's easy doesn't mean we should do it. So, the first step is awareness. Notice when you are doing two things at once, usually involving your phone. And put one down. Finish one task and then do the other. Let's start a new movement called sequentialism, and teach people to really concentrate on one task at a time. Try it for one day and you'll see a very real difference in your life, your work, and your blood pressure. But doesn't that make us inefficient, I hear you cry? No, not necessarily.

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Yes, multitasking has its advantages. Sometimes, it's unavoidable. But many of us miss out on the fact that we're not really doing two things well when we multitask. Usually, we're doing two things adequately without giving either the attention each one deserves. As an organizational leader, I see it every day. While many think productivity is increasing, on further examination it's actually decreasing as the quality of work suffers through multitasking, requiring a lot of rework. Besides, look at the message it sends. When you are leading a meeting and you receive a text, what does that say to everyone in attendance if you stop the meeting and reply? Is that the message you want to send to your people? Is everyone on board with the message you're presenting when they know you're not fully paying attention? How do you feel when you host a meeting and discover people texting or using their smartphones during your spiel? Not good. So, while I would never advocate giving up technology, put the phone down and concentrate on what you're doing. Then, set aside some time to concentrate on yourself.

Some people meditate. Some people jog. Some people ride trail bikes. Whatever it is that gives you an opportunity to put down tech and focus solely on one thing, do it. Regularly set aside a good amount of time for that pastime. But while you're meditating, jogging, or biking, remember that feeling. Remember the absolute, comprehensive efficiency that focusing on one thing brings you. Recognize it. Nurture it. And then transfer it to the workplace. What you'll find is a new level of focus and concentration that will help you dispense with tasks better and more efficiently. You will be working smarter. You may even end up working less...

While this is something I practice, it is also something we preach in WTS-LA. Through numerous professional development programs we host, we teach focus as something that is just as critical as networking or learning to craft a resume. It is a fundamental skill that will help young transportation professionals—particularly women—advance. The ability to focus completely affects every aspect of work from communication to education to something as simple as asking good questions or taking direction. Focusing is not a soft skill; it's a hard reality. And it is one that we must all relearn.

But there is one critical caveat. Please do not practice focus to the point of myopia, particularly in dealing with ideas and people. That is not focus; that's, well, myopia. Focus should not exclude being open and receptive. Stretch your boundaries. Be open to all ideas. Be inclusive. Don't treat focus as a means for exclusion. Treat it as a positive methodology for being more purposeful and efficient. As an organization, WTS-LA has demonstrated great strength and resilience in changing times largely because of its profound understanding of and respect for the need for focus and direction.

A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention. But it does not have to. By teaching ourselves to carefully focus, regardless of the bombardment of information, we can learn to better and more effectively handle that information and our lives.