

## Hide Your Phone When You're Trying to Work. Seriously.

The biggest roadblock to your productivity is the smartphone on your desk.

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By Tim Herrera, Dec. 2, 2018

**The New York Times**

As I type this, my iPhone is tucked away inside my desk drawer under lock and key. It's been there all day, completely out of sight. I'm slightly anxious about the notifications I might be missing, but only slightly; it's a manageable level that's not distracting.

Yes, it's a little extreme to lock your phone in a drawer. But I've learned that it's the only way I can truly focus and be as productive as I want to be. And unfortunately, the same is true for you, even if you don't realize it — or want to believe it. (Airplane mode, sadly, won't help — more on that later.)

A 2017 study in *The Journal of the Association of Consumer Research* found that the mere presence of your phone — even if it's powered off, and even if you're actively and successfully ignoring it — “reduces available cognitive capacity,” which the study's authors call “brain drain.”

Worse still: The more you depend on your phone, the more your cognitive abilities suffer when it's around. “If it's in the environment, it's almost like it's calling out to us,” said Adrian Ward, assistant professor in the marketing department at the *University of Texas at Austin*. “We're automatically drawn to it.”

He went on: “And so now the problem becomes not to figure out what to pay attention to, but resisting that automatic pull. You actually have to devote some of your cognitive resources to resisting,” he said.

Because phones have taken over so many duties in our day-to-day lives — scheduling, shopping, acting as alarm clocks, holding lists, almost all communication, etc. — they occupy outsize portions of our overall attentional capacity, Mr. Ward said.

“Adoption has really outpaced understanding,” he said. Gadgets were “these shiny cool things we want to play with, and then before we knew it they infiltrated every square inch of our lives.”

If this all sounds familiar, you might remember a handful of studies last year — highlighted in this hugely popular story — that looked at how laptops affect the performance of students in lectures. Unexpectedly, the studies almost universally found that performance and information retention and absorption suffer when students have a laptop nearby during lectures.

More surprising, however, is that one study found that students who didn't even have a laptop were negatively affected simply by being in the presence of someone else's laptop.

Put another way: The moment a device enters your general proximity, even if it's not yours, your cognitive performance starts to decline.

Yep. Life is unfair.

So what are we slaves to technology supposed to do with this? Throw our phones, laptops and tablets out the window? Sure! That is a great option and I wholeheartedly support you in this.

But if you'd rather not toss a few thousand dollars' worth of tech in the garbage, there are some slightly less extreme things you can do to minimize the brain drain caused by your devices.

The first step toward recovery, Mr. Ward advised, is simply being aware of how much of your conscious thoughts are occupied by your phone, whether you're directly using it or just aware that it is in your vicinity. Knowing is half the battle.

Practically, however, getting it out of sight — remember my locked desk drawer? — is probably the most effective and reasonable technique. (The better solution is to leave it in separate room, but we all know you're not going to do that.)

If you do manage to tuck it away out of sight, commit and don't sneak looks. There are mountains of research that show intermittent distractions, like your phone chirping at you with a notification, can have enormous detrimental effects on your productivity. One study found that it can take up to half an hour to resume a task after being interrupted.

When it comes to meetings — of which I am no fan — laptops and phones are surefire ways to make them even less effective. Studies have shown that people who use a laptop during things like lectures and meetings can be so distracted that it's almost as if they aren't present at all. Some companies have even instituted laptop bans during meetings.

If you're able to, leave your laptop (and maybe your phone?) at your desk. Not only will this make you actually pay attention, but it has the added bonus of increasing the likelihood you'll actually get something out of a given meeting: A 2014 study found that taking notes on a laptop, rather than writing them out longhand, impairs “learning because their use results in shallower processing,” adding that “laptop note takers' tendency to transcribe lectures verbatim rather than processing information and reframing it in their own words is detrimental to learning.”

Still, it's not easy to abandon the pieces of technology we've built our lives around. If you're trying and failing to leave your phone in the drawer, don't worry. Just keep trying. Even the most knowledgeable of us have trouble with it.

“It's a struggle,” Mr. Ward said. “My fiancée has to knock my phone out of my hands more often than I'd like.”

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References to underlined links about:

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