

[Why Badges and Notifications are Killing your Productivity](#)

You have a mission here to prove me wrong ☐

This blog is about methods to keep attention and increase productivity. The whole read should be less than 6 minutes. Good luck, and I hope you find this helpful!

There are a lot of challenges we face on a daily basis. Abundance of information is an incredible value that we have thanks to social media, continuous availability of our resources online, worldwide access to a wealth of knowledge and to people everywhere. The down side to this access is that it's a trade-off. Herbert A. Simon, an economist and political scientist, sums it up well in this statement:

“in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume”

Cal Newport (<http://calnewport.com/>) wrote a great book called Deep Work, and shares many ways that you can attack the issue of scarcity of attention when doing what requires specific and focused attention on a subject.

What I want to share with you here is a life hack that I borrowed from the ideas of Newport, Tim Ferris (<http://tim.blog>) and others, which has led to some proven success over the last few years and increased success in recent weeks and months as I have aggressively adjusted my routines to embrace these methods.

Badges?! We don't need no stinking badges!

Beep! That sound of a notification sends you an audible or vibrating buzz (and fires off a shot of dopamine to your brain) in order to get you to stop what you're doing and look at your email/phone/computer. We are living in a culture of immediacy with email, text messages, Skype, Slack, and dozens of other tools that are fighting for our immediate attention.

Here is the maxim that I use: nothing needs your immediate attention, or if it does, it should be a focus not a fight.

Some simple rules I've been able to apply which help bring this focus are:

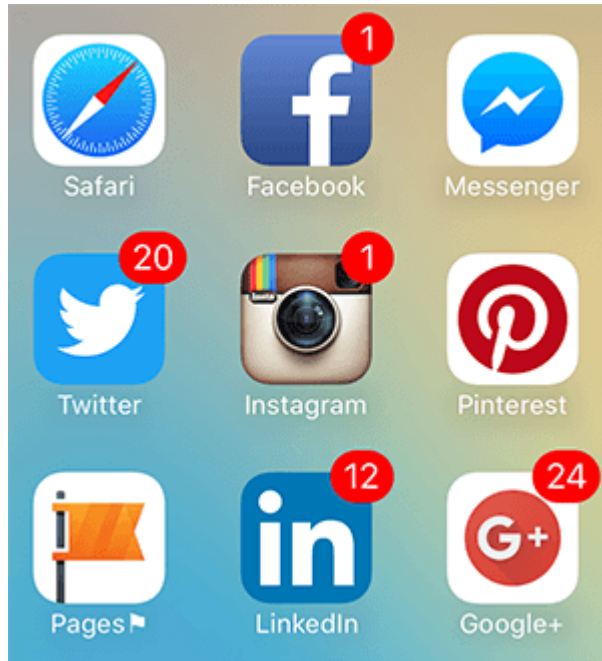
1. Email is not an immediate communication tool - Don't send an email and expect a quick reply
2. If everything is a "rush" then nothing is - prioritization is relative, so use the phrases rush, ASAP, and High Priority carefully
3. Would this task/message/process fail if you were sick for 1-2 days? - Imagine if you suddenly had to call in sick for 1 or 2 days and whether this task would be waited on or re-assigned as a

result. Odds are it can wait

4. Does the number of notifications and unread items increase the anxiety and decrease your ability to focus on prioritizing your work?

Number 4 is the important point as you get ready to start your focus experiment.

Turning off Badges Enables Productivity



The badge notifications showing unread account are decreasing your ability to prioritize. That's a fact. If you have 3 things to do, you can prioritize them with relative ease. If you have 5 you start to run out of ways to prioritize due to amount of time you can think about getting them done in. Move beyond 5 into double and triple digit counts and you are off the rails on ability to prioritize and you are now swimming in attention deficit.

This is where your experiment begins. What would happen if you turned off the badge counters in your apps (email, Slack, etc.) and just moved to checking on a regular cadence and ignoring the "number"? Spoiler alert: it will make you more productive.

Here are the steps I took that you should too:

Step 1: Shut of the badge counters in all of my apps other than Skype and iMessage which I elected as prioritized apps

Step 2: Develop patterns to check regularly, but less often (e.g. 10 AM, 1 PM, 3 PM, 5 PM)

Step 3: Create a pattern where you become available for checking and response

Step 4: Enjoy!

What I've proven with my social and work circles over the change in my habits and patterns is that if you reply immediately to emails, you will be expected to always reply immediately to email. If you need to be reached quickly, there is an expectation that every channel is a path to immediate response. It also means that every time to stop to pick up a message/notification it takes your attention away from another task.

Choose your “In case of rapid response” method using {tool of choice}

For my work, Skype and iMessage are the two methods that I have highlighted as more immediate accessibility. Skype is the primary chat method for work and iMessage is the one thing I do check as my family uses it. You must also train yourself to not answer every message or check every message immediately. If you're in a group chat, let it roll by for a while and shake off the dopamine-triggered response need that we all have. We are literally fighting off biology and deep-rooted psychological responses here, for our own good.

Over the course of a pattern training you will find the you can differentiate better between prioritizing and just attention-stealing tasks and notifications. The schedule does not create the habit as much as your desire to use the schedule as a way to create the habit. What I mean is that you have to strive for the goal of stretching out the attention-eating activities and use the attention-focused times towards more tasks which need deeper thought and focus.

Your Productivity (and You) are Looking Up

If you've stuck it through to this part of the blog, you have given yourself the first positive result. just by spending the 3-5 minutes reading this has proven that you are keen to know how to keep attentive to a task. Did you know that the average time spent on most blog articles hovers around 1 minute? It isn't that you read them in 1 minute, but that most people start to scan, scroll, and then skip the content as attention fades.

REMEMBER: Your goal here is to focus attention, not to ignore things. This is about being able to more effectively attach focus and prioritization to a task or set of tasks and to increase the flow of work. You may even find that the task is a 2-3 minute task but even in that 2-3 minute period you might find yourself thinking about something else or reaching for your phone to check a notification which cuts into that productive time.

This will undoubtedly help when you need to dedicate deep attention to things like reading a long-form book or article, writing, programming, requirements gathering for a technical project, or other tasks that need warm up and undivided attention.

Another bonus effect is that you find yourself looking up instead of down into your phone when there may be something or someone who needs your attention.

More than just the interruptions

Simon Sinek, author of Start with Why and other great books, explains the deeper issue with this subject. This is beyond the 6 minutes I promised you would need to read this article. It's a worthwhile video to watch and you may find some inspiration in it. If you find these tips helpful, please drop in a comment below or send me a message on Twitter. I promise that i do read them and take all the comments as great feedback, I just can't promise I read it the moment you post it ☐