

Concentration

Distractions fill our worlds all day long – emails, loud conversations, cell phones, radios and televisions—the list seems endless. But why do these grab and hold our attention when our other projects are so important or urgent?

In her book “Rapt” Winifred Gallagher takes a close look at the science of paying attention. Apparently the brain is hardwired to pay attention to the most “colorful” thing in its environment; read this as loud, interesting or literally colorful. Brain scans show our brains light differently up when these kinds of events invade our environment.

It is certainly difficult to fight this biologically based pull, but science also shows that we can pull our attention away from a sight or sound that grabs our attention. We can use our pre-frontal cortex, the aware thinking part of the brain to override the intrusion. With practice we can improve our capacity to focus.

We can increase our abilities through biofeedback and/or regularly meditate. Ms. Gallagher is a fan of meditation to increase focus, but she admits to using an even simpler method when she’s trapped in a noisy environment – earplugs. She compares this to a personal stimulus control shelter.

She also says that after a period of concentration, your prefrontal cortex probably needs a break. Simple tasks like answering e-mail or returning phone calls can help you rest and be ready to focus again. Beware of getting distracted though, because after an interruption the brain can take 20 minutes to do its equivalent of rebooting.

Ms. Gallagher also feels that “Multitasking is a myth.” “You cannot do two things at once. The mechanism of attention is selection: it’s either this or it’s that. People don’t understand that attention is a finite resource, like money.”

To have fewer distractions and 20 minute periods of rebooting, try turning down the frequency of email retrieval, work on difficult or important projects first while your brain is most able to manage distractions well, and arrange uninterrupted work time.

If you’d like to introduce your staff to other ways to manage projects and workflow, or would like ideas to increase your productivity, please call Birke Consulting to discuss your needs and ideas.