**Why focus is the key to success** *by Adam Palin - Los Angeles Times – 10/2713*

Please concentrate. Your ability to focus productively is being undermined by the daily bombardment of emails, text messages and audio-visual stimulation. This threat demands our attention, Daniel Goleman writes, because focus is the secret of success.

A psychologist, former science journalist at the New York Times and author of the bestselling book "Emotional Intelligence," Goleman appears to have the measure of his readers. In his new book, "Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence," he cleverly employs short chapters littered with case studies to engage professionals swimming against a tide of electronic correspondence. The book was published by Harper Collins. Goleman's premise is that our ability to block out the mass of digital distractions is diminished by the "cognitive exhaustion" they cause. Without finding ways to be focused, we cannot help but be distracted.

**Mindlessness** — when your thoughts are always wandering — is potentially "the single biggest waster of attention in the workplace," he says.

Developing its opposite — the increasingly popular trait of **mindfulness** — by training the brain to pay complete attention to the current moment is crucial. Mindfulness allows us to concentrate on what is important and not be distracted by the noise around us.

Involuntary, or "bottom-up," neural processes cause the mind to drift and, in particular, to be distracted by visual stimuli. To counter this habit, we need to apply intentional "top-down" focus, which "offers the mind a lever to manage our brain." This battle between top and bottom processes matters because our capacity to apply full attention — "neural lock-in" — is a great mental asset.

High achievers, Goleman writes, master three types of focus: inner, other and outer, which he calls "triple-focus." "Inner" focus describes self-awareness; "other" relates to empathy; and "outer" focus refers to awareness of our environment. But do not despair if you cannot imagine how to break your compulsion to check emails every few minutes.

Focus, Goleman writes, can be developed: "Think of attention as a mental muscle that we can strengthen by a workout." To develop greater cognitive control, we can exercise our minds through methods such as "single-pointed concentration," including meditation. "Smart practice," as Goleman calls it, must also include rest and positivity. Thinking positively stimulates openness to new ideas and objectives.

For business leaders, the need for mindfulness is particularly acute, the writer says: "Leadership itself hinges on effectively capturing and directing the collective attention." This involves focusing on developments outside the organization, as well as attracting and directing the attention of people inside and outside the organization.

To illustrate this point, Goleman contrasts the success of Apple's late chief executive [Steve Jobs](http://www.latimes.com/topic/economy-business-finance/computing-information-technology-industry/steve-jobs-PEBSL000057.topic) with the leadership of [BlackBerry](http://www.latimes.com/topic/economy-business-finance/blackberry-ORCRP013077.topic), its struggling rival. Upon his return to Apple in 1997, Jobs streamlined its strategy to focus on just four products, each designed for specific markets. This, Goleman writes, depended on a vigilant attention to what consumers were looking for to chart Apple's course. By contrast, BlackBerry failed to respond early enough to the iPhone era, and its domination of the corporate phone market crumbled.

Goleman, however, questions the purpose of achieving true focus without worthy objectives that extend beyond our own personal ends. He concludes by considering how our cognitive bias toward present concerns means we "lack the sufficient bandwidth" to recognize existential threats, specifically the one posed by climate change. After all, in 2009 he followed up "Emotional Intelligence" with "Ecological Intelligence." This lofty epilogue partly betrays the book's own focus. Nevertheless, Goleman has provided a highly readable manifesto for turning our smartphones off once in a while.

*Adam Palin is a writer for the Financial Times of London, in which this review first appeared.*