You stand in front of the meeting, desperately trying to drag people's attention away from their iPhones (or whatever other handheld device is currently popular in your office). You get more and more frustrated as no-one listens to your brilliant presentation that you prepared, working late into the night.

  How do you take control of the meeting – is it even possible to tell your CEO (or a potential client), to put away their toys and focus on what is happening here and now? Chances are, you may blow any chance of promotion or landing the deal. And of course, they could be Googling some of your facts in order to verify what you are saying – they may in fact be paying very close attention after all.

Two airline pilots from Northwest Airlines in the US were recently stripped of their licenses for overshooting the airport they were aiming at by 240 kilometers whilst they checked out their schedules on their personal laptops. As with anyone, the problem with hand-held computers and laptops is that they are dual-use devices to take a military phrase. No – I don't mean they can be used for good OR evil; only that they can be used to enhance the current task or allow the user to multi-task.

We are all guilty of this lack of focus at times – admit that you have checked your phone messages in the middle of a conference or downloaded emails whilst in a meeting. Probably not the greatest sin you can commit, unlike the Northwest pilots who failed to respond to hails for over an hour, prompting fighter jets to be put on alert and endangering other air traffic in the process. However, are you really performing to your best when you multi-task?

Besides the stress information overload and multi-tasking can cause, it actually can make you stupider. In a study at Hewlett-Packard, IQ tested with and without distraction showed that the interruptions and distraction caused a 10-point drop in IQ measurements. This means that we are effectively working well below our potential if we don't manage these disruptions, especially if we are actually required to think in our jobs (admittedly, not all tasks or jobs require the same level of mental input).

The findings of brain imaging research work has proven that performing two tasks concurrently results in each of them being processed less efficiently than when done sequentially, so why do we still set such store by the ability to multi-task?

Even if what we are doing is not necessarily mentally taxing, mistakes are sure to creep in if we are not focused. Think about what happens when you are concentrating on something and the phone rings. You may be distracted and miss important information in the phone call and you will also have to "refocus" again once the call is finished and perhaps go back a step or two to regain your momentum.   On average, you will be interrupted every 11 minutes and it can take up to 25 minutes to return to what you were busy with before the interruption.   This kind of interrupt driven communication is so commonplace, we have come to expect it.

So, how do we become more engaged and participative? How do we grab people's attention away from those devices (especially when it is not possible to ask them to turn them off)? You probably remember a teacher who you listened to whilst at school, not because her lessons were more interesting but because she had a habit of calling on people randomly during class and, if you were not listening, your embarrassment was enough to ensure that in future, even if you did not hang on every word she said, you paid attention, "just in case". The same can work in the boardroom or at conferences. Involve your audience. Don't let them sit back and wait for you to entertain them. After all, if what you are presenting is relevant and worthwhile, they will soon become more engaged and the presentation will be remembered.

It may even be necessary to refuse to present unless the leaders in the room are engaged and

paying attention. Stop talking when you notice them checking their email and wait for them to focus back on you before talking again. If this fails, chances are you are wasting your time anyway. Politely excuse yourself and leave. Even McDonald's employees will politely refuse to serve someone talking on a cellphone – besides the bad manners the customer is displaying, it holds up the line – there is no more serious transgression in a McDonald's restaurant than causing a delay to the speed of delivery.

The same problem occurs when you are in front of your computer. You are desperately trying to finish a report or finalise a document but your email icon keeps popping up with new email. Or your IM client "bings" at you. Before you know it, you have immersed yourself in a conversation with your best friend or started to read an online article that caught your attention in the email you "quickly" opened.

The way we work needs to change. We need to become more focused and learn to ignore the various technological distractions around us. The following philosophy will help in achieving this:

   - Everything is a task – communication, email, reports, phone calls – everything can be defined as a task with a required completion time and an expected outcome. By defining what you do in this way and keeping it in a list or using a software programme, it becomes easier to prioritise and you don't have to worry about that phone call you need to make if you know the details are noted and you will be reminded to do it timeously. You can focus on the job at hand, rather than trying to keep a list of "to do's" in your head.
   - Make a decision – every task requires a decision to be made as it arrives on your desk. Either:
   - Delegate it – give it to the right person. Often tasks land up on a busy person's desk unnecessarily out of the belief that they are the one who will get it done, not necessarily because they are the best person to do the job.
   - Delay it - make a note and forget about it for now until it needs to be done. Time is often wasted worrying about tasks that need to take place next week or need to wait for more information. Just park it and forget about it for now.
   - Dump it - spam mail is an obvious one but there are many other tasks which should actually be dumped but that we keep on our to do list forever in the hopes that we will get to it "one day".
   - Do it – probably the hardest of all because, just as you get started another email/task/sms arrives and the process starts again

   - Reduce interruptions – it may help to close off email programmes or IM clients and cellphones when you need to concentrate. Use your technological tools to improve your efficiency instead of invading your workspace with constant reminders. Automated responses on email are an excellent example.

It may seem simple in reading this article but practically, it is extremely hard to put down the Blackberry and ignore the constant buzzing of the phone telling you that you have received another message. However, without giving yourself the space and time to think and contemplate, the quality of what you produce is limited. So, take a page out of Newton's book and sometimes simply take the time to sit under a tree. When the apple lands on your head,

you will know that the time was worthwhile and that you don't need your laptop, cellphone or palm pilot to be productive.

By Pieter Hugo