



WHY ALWAYS BEING 'ON' IS NO  
LONGER ON

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MAXIMUS

## **New insights into how our brains work can help you regain control in a hyperactive world.**

Many of you will miss this line without seeing the mistake. Why?

There's a word missing, but you probably didn't notice because you were skimming. Not paying full attention is common in our information-heavy world. How many of us read just the subject line of an email or skip through a report to the recommendations?

Technology has transformed the workplace. We use it to develop smarter strategies, improve our customer service, and communicate instantly. However, there's a downside to it, too. If you're a typical executive, the sheer volume of information you deal with every day makes it hard to focus on what's important. There are too many distractions, there's too little time to prioritise, and there's too much fear of missing that vital piece of information.

At the same time, we are living in a global marketplace that is connected 24/7. The line between work hours and personal time has blurred; bosses, colleagues, and customers expect you to be available at any hour, no matter where you are.

Evolving technologies are also driving fundamental shifts in the business environment. Customer loyalty is decreasing, competition is increasing, and the only constant is change. It's easy to feel you are always on — at the mercy of other people, the never-ending flood of information, or a highly pressurised workplace. What many executives don't realise is that being permanently stressed not only makes them grumpy, tired and unhealthy, it affects work performance too.

### **Reduced strategic agility**

The business world is changing and executives must change accordingly. Flexibility, responsiveness, and innovation are essential to drive progress and lead your organisation through future challenges. Having an overloaded brain stops us from making the cognitive effort to switch from focusing on business as usual to the more challenging mode of exploring new ideas and approaches.

### **Inferior decision-making**

"A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention," wrote Nobel Prize winning economist Herbert Simon in 1971 before the Internet was even invented. When you're a senior executive making high-stakes decisions, being in the information age means you will be bombarded every hour by opinions, data, and analysis. Some people find it hard to cut through the noise and think clearly about the desired outcome, leading to decisions that are delayed, unclear, or just plain wrong.

### **Poorer focus**

Humans love to learn new things. But feed our brains too much information and they become over-stimulated, leading to forgetfulness and lack of clarity. The answer to living in such a complex world should be multitasking, but just two percent of people can do it successfully. The rest of us have brains that are incapable of focusing on more than one thing at a time and allocate brain space proportionately. The result is that trying to do two or more things at work leads to a 50 percent increase in errors.

## **We need to retrain our brains**

Being physically and emotionally drained by a continually switched on work environment is not sustainable. Fortunately, you can reduce anxiety levels by tapping into new knowledge about our brains. Over the past two decades, great advances in understanding how the human brain works and how to optimise our thinking have been made. However, few of these insights have been applied in the corporate world.

## **Be more mindful**

Whatever you are doing, you're either fully engaged or you're not — you're either mindful or mindless. Being mindful has a positive effect on the areas of our brains relating to attention, emotional control, empathy, learning, memory, and self-awareness. It also expands mental clarity and big picture thinking.

New research points to mindfulness as having a significant impact on workplace performance. Practiced every day for 30 minutes, it can rewire your brain permanently in just eight weeks. You can improve mindfulness with techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, or yoga. This might seem too new age for the mainstream corporate world, but organisations such as Google, Unilever, and IBM are teaching it.

## **Improve your focus**

If you cannot focus your attention on what's important, how can you expect other people to focus theirs? By improving your focus, you will improve your performance and your team's.

Focus relies on two things: controlling your prefrontal cortex, which we now know governs willpower, and collecting your thoughts so you know what to focus on. The more you strengthen your willpower, the more focused you will be. So whether you are in a board meeting or at a family dinner, give it your full attention. Mindfulness exercises can help to develop this skill.

Find uninterrupted time to think and get creative. Assign 30 minutes in your early morning diary to contemplate the day ahead or use exercise time to mentally work through ideas. Once you are clear about what you want to achieve and able to focus on it, it's much easier to tune out distractions, reprioritise less important tasks, and overcome obstacles.

## **Work smarter**

Australian executives work much longer hours than the OECD average. However, longer hours doesn't necessarily mean higher productivity. For example, researchers have proved we pay attention for no more than 90 minutes. Yet we still sit through three-hour meetings. It's time to work smarter, not harder. This may mean challenging the status quo, but different times demand different approaches.

## **Develop deep self-awareness**

Being clear about who you are and what you want to achieve — and having the confidence to apply this knowledge — is increasingly being recognised as an effective way to reduce stress. To avoid this situation, take time to work out your life goals and values, and ask colleagues how they perceive you. By building a picture of the person people think you are and the person you aspire to be, you can start to frame all your decisions and actions in a way that allows you to be true to yourself.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### VANESSA GAVAN

Vanessa Gavan is the founder and managing director of Maximus International. For over 15 years, she has consulted to a range of leading Australian and international organisations to enhance business strategies, improve executive leadership capability, redesign organisational structures, and deliver operational performance solutions.

As an entrepreneur and business leader, Vanessa has lived through every business life cycle and has refined her abilities to inspire, deploy, and motivate people to achieve great things.



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