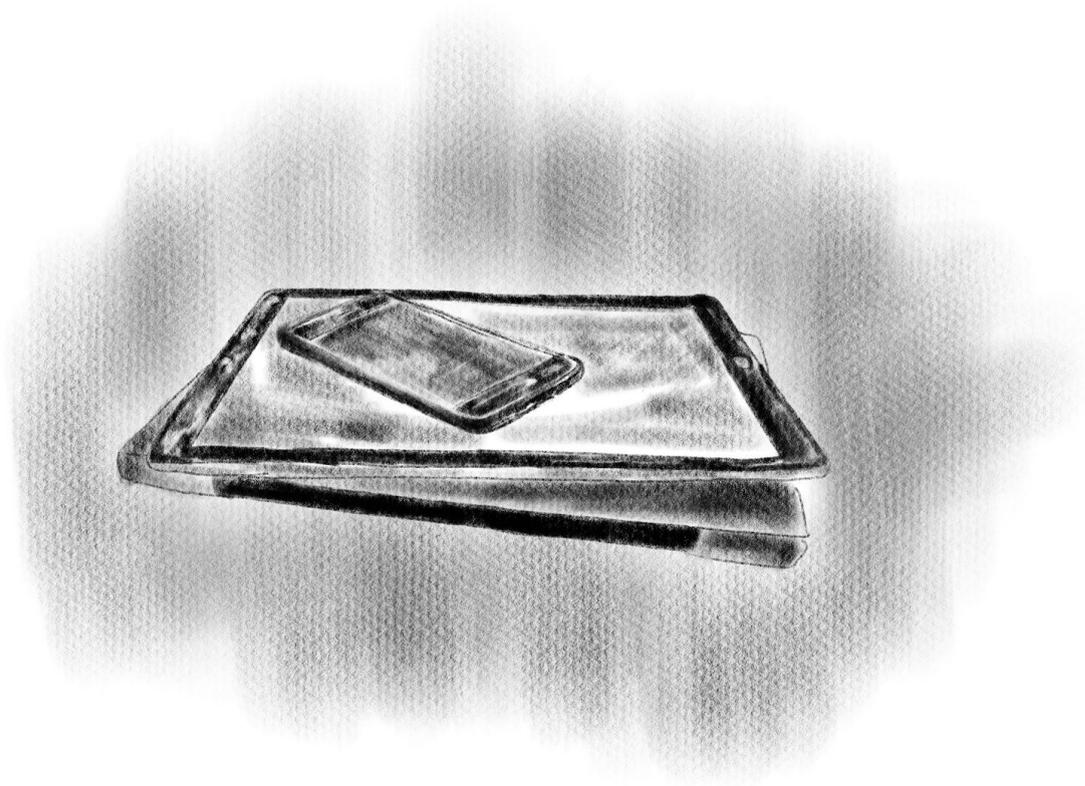


## How much of our focus do we own?

A reflection on what Nir Eyal nails in his book *Indistractable*, and what we think he's missing.



It stands to reason that something as fragmented and multiplicitous as distraction would have a similarly complex origin. In Eyal's latest book, *Indistractable: how to control your attention and choose your life*, Eyal sets himself an ambitious and timely project: to provide a richer articulation of why and how modern life has become so rife with distraction, and what we--with the right tools and intentions--can do about it.

What is particularly of note in Eyal's book is the way it quickly dismisses the topical--and very zeitgeisty--diagnosis of the problem as the sole responsibility of technology. Sure, Eyal admits, smartphones and the gamification of applications and notification design doesn't help, but it isn't the root problem. Throughout history, Eyal argues, society has always toed the line between perceiving innovation as progress or innovation as destructive. From Socrates' insistence on oral discussion over written texts to the invention of the printing press to the rise of radio and television in the 20th century, we've always been torn between the possibilities technology provides, and its potential to dumb down humanity.

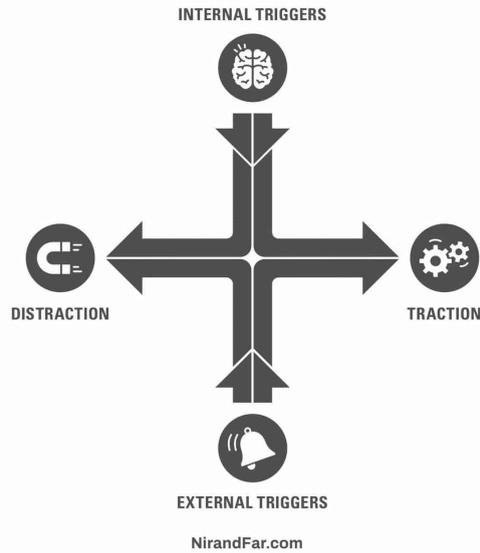
Indeed, if simply absconding from the use of technology led to a kind of utopic state of focus and contentment, chances are a lot of people, after tasting the bliss even briefly, would be willing and able to make that leap. But of course the problem isn't so simple. Technology--and the tools that compose it--isn't inherently good or bad. How we use it, and

the extent to which it uses or rules us, is the main point of contention, and is impacted by a complex network of factors. Some of these factors are up to us, and some are part of dominant cultural trends that we are not entirely powerless to, but cannot completely control, either.



## A four-fold approach

Early on in the book, Eyal presents his 'solution' for distraction, pictured below:



The goal is to master internal triggers, minimize external triggers, prevent distraction, and find time for traction. By looking at the arrows, we can see that the triggers are the inputs, which then meet a crossroads, one direction leading towards traction, the other towards distraction. The main argument Eyal begins with--and what I would argue is the fundamental backbone of his approach throughout--is that “distraction starts from within.” By this definition, we are not distracted but rather seek distraction as the momentary alleviator of our dissatisfied emotional and psychic state. Instead of being passive victims, we are active agents in our process of distraction.

Eyal argues that this is an important distinction to make, because without recognizing our role in the process, we are unlikely to deal with the problem at its roots. Exactly how we deal with the problem is what Eyal explores throughout the rest of the book.

## Towards an indistractable future

Eyal’s writing is at its best when he elegantly presents the studies, analysis, and analogies that back up his thesis. (For instance, that participants in a [study](#) would rather electrocute themselves than sit in boredom, how the depression and anxiety at the root of modern work culture has catastrophic and far reaching [costs](#), and how a culture of always-on multitasking is [destructive](#) and unequivocally [inefficient](#)).

Ultimately, the power of Eyal’s book is less in its unique diagnosis of the problem, nor even in the solutions he offers, but in the simple, intuitive clarity he brings back to the foreground. When we complain about smartphones ruining our lives, email preventing us from being present with loved ones, or iPads turning our childrens’ brains into mush, do we fully believe ourselves? In fact, would we need to bemoan the evils of technology so loudly and so consistently if it really were that simple?

Of course not. Indisputably, lurking in the back of minds as we toggle over to Slack when we should stay focused on the task at hand or when we mindlessly open Instagram on our walk to the restroom is the deeper, intuitive sense that we are 'giving in,' that it would be 'better' not to. By exploring the science and psychology behind phenomena as diverse as why we are [primed](#) to react to communication, and why open seating plans at work--while well intentioned--[are actually a minefield for distraction](#), Eyal shores up the logic to justify an ultimately basic truth: at the end of the day, the difference between being distractible and indistractable is up to us.

Eyal doesn't leave us there, though. Presenting a plethora of tips and strategies for managing internal triggers and hacking back on external triggers, Eyal provides a good (starting) roadmap for what taking back focus might look like. While some of these methods are painted in a somewhat oversimplified picture--if indeed the root of our distraction begins in the complex interconnected triggers of insecurity, boredom, and need for validation, it is hard to believe that simply beginning to notice and track the behavior alone will entirely 'fix' the issue--the real genius of the book is not so much in its original content as in the way it shifts the focal point. Eyal treats the issue of distraction as a bottom up problem that always necessarily begins with the individual.

Yes, he says, workplace culture (and culture generally) impacts our behavior. Yes, technology is designed to distract us. But regardless of our type of work, and regardless of our role, from entry level to CEO, the only way to combat distraction is to take responsibility for our focus, and to lead by example. Our dominant relationship to technology will only change when each of us develops the methods that work for us to safeguard our focus, allowing us to contribute meaningful work and be more present, whether it's at the office or at home. That means not falling into the trap of instant feedback loops on Slack--Eyal even points out how, ironically, [Slack has worked hard to ensure a healthy workplace culture that reduces distraction as much as possible](#)--and creating a work environment where everyone is encouraged to ask questions, provide honest feedback, and clock out. In simple terms, Eyal is gently prodding us towards recognizing that there isn't a simple, one size fits all solution. It's up to us--we really do have to be the change we wish to see in the world.

But perhaps what is most attractive about Eyal's argument (re-endowing the individual with autonomy), is also what is perhaps slightly oversimplified in the book. Is it entirely true (or even desirable) that we have that much power?

## Why make it harder than it needs to be?

Let's face it. Our modern digital work environments are utterly fragmented. They're mine fields of distraction that we are thrown into and expected to not just survive, but thrive in. Eyal doesn't deny this, but by focusing so primarily on the power and responsibility of the individual, the book inadvertently saddles us with a nearly impossible task. Yes, we all need to be aware of our patterns and habits, and work to be the best versions of ourselves we can be, but it's also worth understanding that we're operating within a toxic environment.

What does this translate to?



First off, we need to give ourselves a bit of a break. Is it any wonder that we feel disjointed and frustrated, when the new normal involves hundreds of emails and notifications barraging us day in day out, when our browsers have dozens of tabs open, when we can *never* find that file we most need?

To say that someone ought to muscle their way through and remain focused, despite this environment, is a bit like trying to get someone to successfully stay on a diet while they are surrounded by their favorite snacks all day, or to put a recovering addict back into old environments and expect they will be able to simply *will* their way through it.

Eyal has convincingly called out the weaknesses of extreme arguments which claim technology is some disembodied force we are completely hapless victims to. But hasn't he pivoted to a similarly extreme, overly-simplified picture by going to the complete opposite end? Isn't it more likely that the truth lies somewhere in between?

Yes, individuals should be empowered, informed, and supported to make the best decisions for themselves. Yes, they should probably even be expected to do so--it should be a matter of personal, and cultural responsibility. But isn't it also reasonable to argue that providing these individuals with an environment more conducive to success would make a big difference?

Extreme positions are sexy, but rarely as effective as more moderate, middle ways. If you are truly invested in arming yourself to become indistractable, here's a few recommendations.

- First off, it goes without saying that it's worth giving Eyal's [book](#) a read. It will absolutely give you a better insight into what you are doing while you'd like to be focused, and why you are doing it.
- Next, develop a strategy for yourself in which you can start treating focus as a *practice*, rather than a result.
- Finally, if you're interested in becoming a part of the Focused Work movement, we recommend reading up on the emergent category of Unified Digital Workspaces (you can download a free ebook through this [link](#)). UDWs have been designed to help modern knowledge workers from all backgrounds who want to increase their focus, productivity, and sense of well-being, all while tuning out distraction.

*Dialed is a platform that helps users end distraction and find focus. For more information, visit [Dialed.ai](#).*