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# Michelangelo didn't multitask

JEFFREY ANDREWS



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age, but particularly in our interconnected one. Perhaps the 21st century will be known as the “ADD” century, a stepping stone towards a future time where we rediscover the wisdom of keeping things simple. In the meantime though, successful people—creative people in particular—will need to find ways to manage (and avoid) the intense multitasking demands placed on them. I have found thus far in my career that maintaining focus is the most difficult challenge I face. My main accomplishments have resulted when I have established a goal and been successful in concentrating on it.

**A**s I get ready to head on a mid-summer vacation to Italy with my wife Catherine, I've been thinking about some of the classic works of art that we'll see in Florence, Siena, and Pisa. Having been to Italy before, I recall the ones by Michelangelo in particular standing out as being inspired by something very deep and representing considerable scientific inquiry and exploration on his part. It makes me wonder: could Michelangelo have accomplished such works of genius in the current digitally connected age? Can you imagine Michelangelo sending e-mails instead of writing in his journal or learning about anatomy via Google instead of breaking into the local morgue and performing dissections?

I use this anachronistic example to illustrate that, from what I can tell, great deeds are almost always accomplished by a single-minded determination and focus that is hard to maintain in any

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## Internal overdrive

I think one of the main merits in getting a Ph.D. is spending several years learning better how to focus on a task that is deep, narrow, and often nebulous. This does not come naturally for most people and requires drive and self-discipline in fairly large proportions. In fact, I noticed quite early on during my Ph.D. years at Stanford that the most successful Ph.D. students were not necessarily the “smartest”—although they were usually pretty smart—but instead were the ones who seemed most inspired by their work and driven by something internal to them, rather than external, such as exams, fear of their advisor, or arbitrary deadlines. For the majority of us who struggle with drive and motivation—and I count myself in that group—it is important not to let the buzz of life overwhelm and distract us (too much).

Although I am certainly no expert in this, I'd like to share a few tools I use to help me stay focused. If some of these

sound clichéd, it is because they are true, and worth repeating.

### Clarity, peace, serenity

*Know your goals.* It's hard to be focused if you don't know what you are trying to accomplish. As obvious as it sounds, I think a lot of people suffer from lacking clear goals. I realized, after a helter-skelter first year as a professor, that I was spending lots of time on tasks that did not have a clear payoff. To minimize this, and to keep myself focused, I make a list about every four to six months (usually coinciding with the start of an academic semester) of what I want to accomplish during the next four to six months. Even though I am yet to fully complete such a list, it's a very useful exercise and helps keep my attention focused on tasks that I deem important outside of the day-to-day things that come up, and seem so urgent at the time.

*Getting into "the zone."* I find the hardest part of any task is getting started. The harder I perceive the task to be, the harder I find it to commence

Find a way to avoid distractions. Some people wear earphones, but I like to work somewhere external to my workplace like a café or library. There are other successful approaches, many of which seem to involve caffeine at some level.

work on it. Once I start working, I find that my ability to focus increases considerably. Basketball players call this state of focus and clarity "the zone." I try to document where my work stands at the end of each day—when in "the zone"—and what the next steps are for tomorrow. I find this radically helps with getting started the next day on a difficult task. Figure out tools for finding "the zone" yourself and make it into a routine.

*Escape distractions.* I'm a sucker for distractions, particularly in that delicate 30 minutes or so of work prior to getting in "the zone." It is important to find a way to avoid distractions, be they phone calls, checking e-mail, or being bothered by colleagues. Some people wear earphones, but I like to work

somewhere external to my workplace like a café or the library. I'm sure there are other successful approaches, many of which seem to involve caffeine at some level. Working at home is a popular choice these days, but that has its own pantheon of distractions.

Finally, it's very difficult to do good work unless you have drive and are centered personally. Don't forget to do things you enjoy other than work. It will make that time at work seem more finite and will keep you more focused when working. And of course that's the stuff that in the end really matters. That is, unless your work is as timeless as Michelangelo's. I have no such pretenses.

### About the author

Jeffrey Andrews is an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Fundamentals of WiMAX*.

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