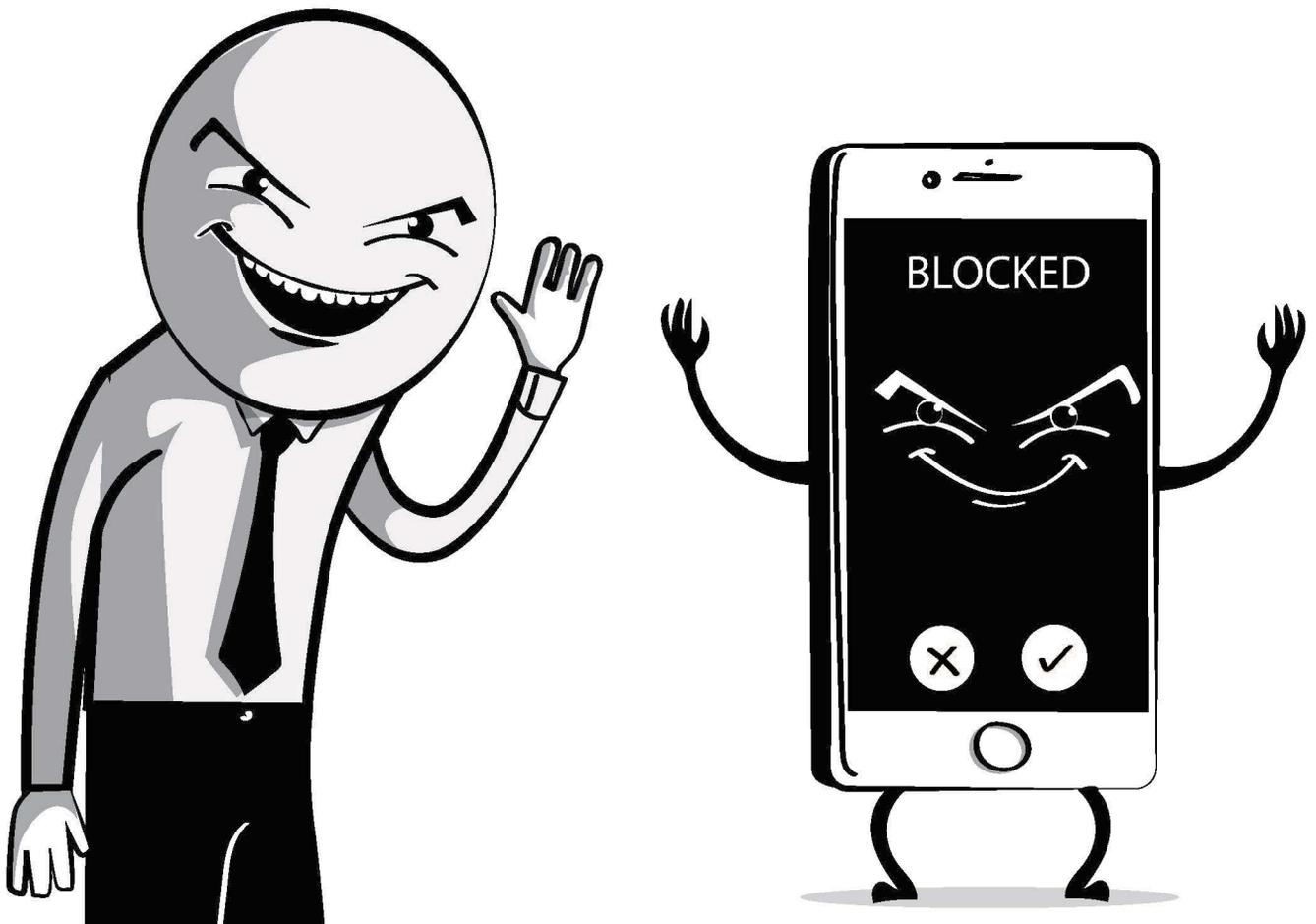
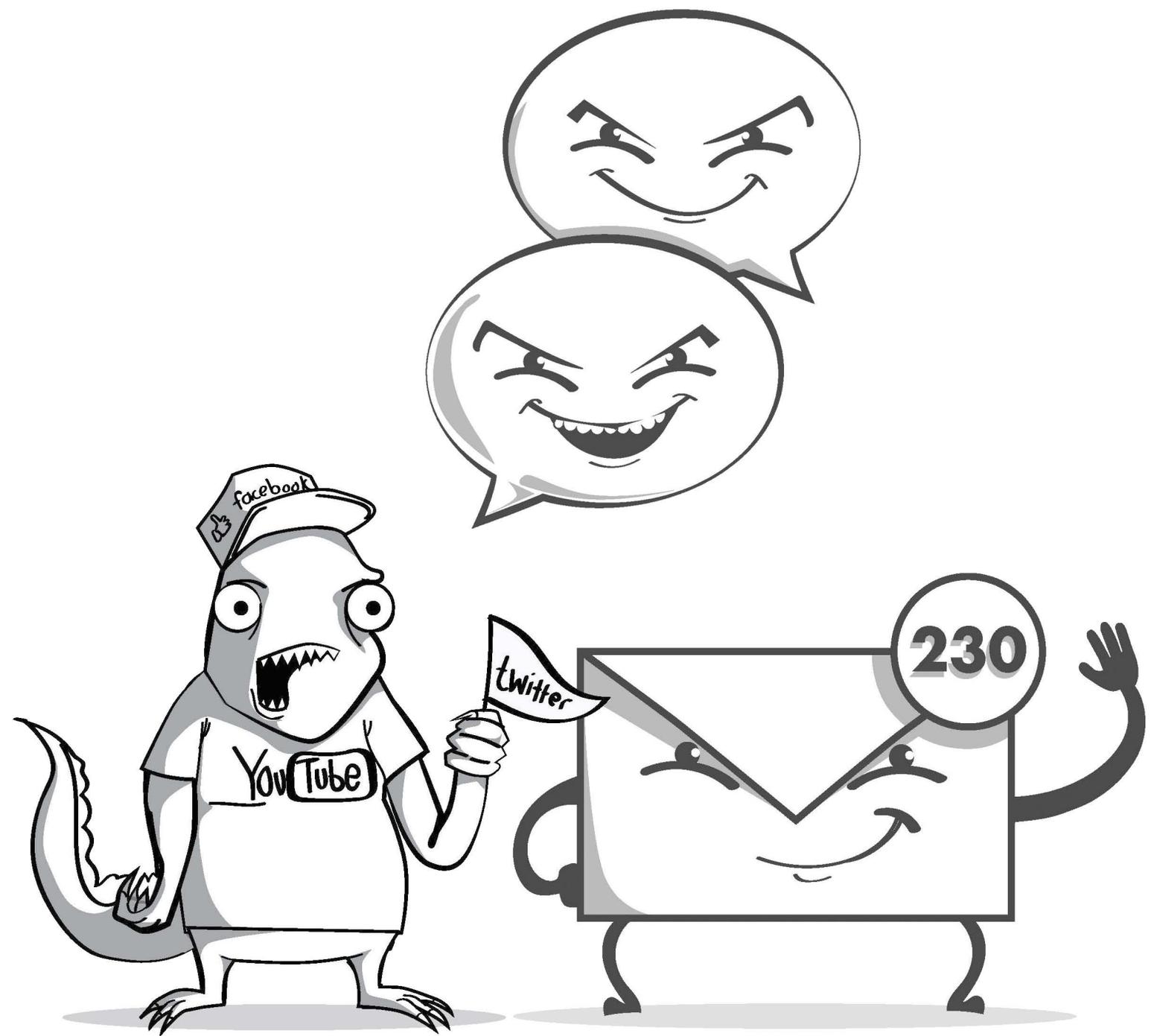


Defending Your Galaxy

Against the Supervillains of Distraction

By Darrell Easley





What would you say if I told you there are supervillains lurking in your workplace right this very minute? They are dangerous and deceptive, and you've no doubt experienced their dastardly deeds at one time or another. They pop up unexpectedly, sometimes in rapid succession, usually several times a day ... and they all share a common goal: to derail your focus and undermine your productivity. I like to call them the supervillains of distraction. Just how detrimental to getting things done are these bad guys? An overview by the American Psychological Association of

several studies on multitasking suggests that individuals are up to 40 percent less productive when they are constantly moving from one task to another. A recent study out of University of California-Irvine found that a typical office worker gets 11 minutes between interruptions, while it takes an average of 23 minutes to return to focus on a task. And a 2012 study by Professor David Strayer of the University of Utah found that only about 2 percent of people are actually good at multitasking; for the other 98 percent, multitasking negatively affects their attention span, concentration and productivity.

The Supervillains Unmasked (and How to Thwart Them)

Now that we know what they aim to do and how they can affect your work, let's take a closer look at some of these supervillains of distraction you might encounter during your work day, and some tactics you can employ to keep them at bay until that report is written, that project is complete or that brainstorming session is over.

Email of Eviiiiil

That's not a typo. When something is really bad, it's "eviiiiil!" This villain's tactic is sheer volume. Sure, it starts out in the morning with a handful of new emails in your inbox, but pretty soon you've amassed scores of messages, and any attempt to organize them becomes null as more and more roll in.

One antidote: Batch process your email during certain periods of time, especially if you're working on an important or time-sensitive project. If the nature of your work is such that you could go several hours without checking email, then check it only once or twice a day, and only respond to time-sensitive messages until you finish the work you're trying to get done.

The Infamous IM and His Sidekick, the Terrible Text

These villains' tactic is the art of surprise ... you never know when they will creep up. And many of us just can't wait to see who is at the other end of that alert.

One antidote: When something absolutely, positively needs your full focus, disable the alerts for this duo. Suddenly, they have no effect.

The Phone of Fury

The Phone of Fury attacks you everywhere — in your office, in your car, at home, on your lunch break, at the

gym. Sometimes this villain can pull you away from the task at hand for many minutes at a time.

One antidote: From time to time, it's okay to turn your ringer off. (One caveat: If your job requires you to answer the phone, be sure to not let the other villains distract you, so that you can give the caller your full attention and provide the support he or she needs.)

The Deadly Drop-By

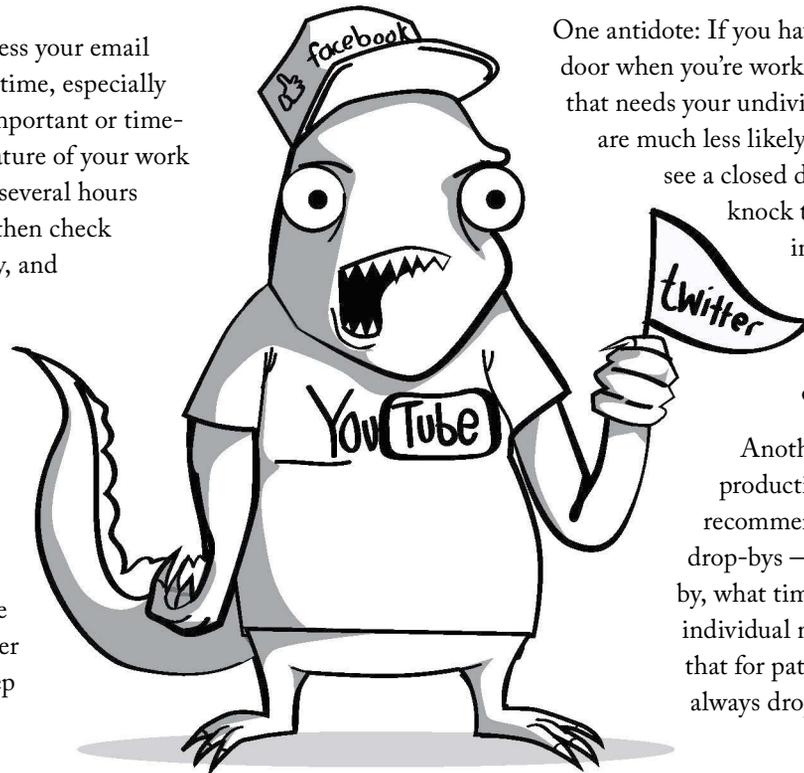
Ever had this happen? You're working diligently on a task, you're in your groove, you're making good progress, and then a coworker drops by with a question, a concern, an idea to bounce off you or just to chat. Whether the drop-by visit was two minutes or 20 minutes, your concentration is now broken and you're off task.

One antidote: If you have an office, close the door when you're working on something that needs your undivided attention. People are much less likely to drop by if they see a closed door and have to knock to enter. If you work in a cubicle, tack a "do not disturb" or "unavailable until 2 p.m." sign on the outside.

Another strategy: Some productivity experts recommend keeping a log of drop-bys — note who dropped by, what time and what the individual needed, and analyze that for patterns. Does Jane always drop by mid-morning on payroll processing days with questions about the new system? There may something

you can do to alleviate that, like recommend more training.

When I'm working on a task that needs my undivided attention and I get a drop-by, I've found that standing up and remaining standing for the duration of the visit helps cut down on the amount of time the person stays in my office.



One way to combat distractions is to practice deep work, which requires sustained focus and attention.

Social Media Saboteur

This is another bad guy that can get you from multiple angles, sending you down a rabbit hole of internet browsing, Facebook posts and viral memes. The good news is that this time sucker is the only one of the gang that is completely within your control — only you have the final say as to whether or not you click on that video link or check your Twitter feed.

One antidote: Block certain websites, turn off social media notifications, and close out of your web browser for certain periods of time while you work on a time-sensitive task. Just know that there's always going to be a "loophole" with this approach, so it really just comes down to self discipline.

Two Overarching Strategies to Help Keep You on Track

Now that we've identified several of the worst offenders

for derailing your productivity and specific ways to combat each one, let's take a look at two big-picture strategies that can help keep you on task on any given day.

Practice Deep Work

In his book *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, Cal Newport delves into how everyday distractions that we sometimes let drive our work (email, social media, the phone ringing off the hook, office buzz) can negatively affect our ability to do what he calls "deep work" — that is, work that requires sustained focus and attention. One way to combat distractions and help us be our most productive, Newport says, is to practice deep work. In the book, he discusses four philosophies for deep work — monastic, bimodal, rhythmic and journalistic. The monastic approach attempts to maximize deep focus by minimizing shallow work. An example of the monastic

approach is an author completely focused on writing a novel. All of his or her working time is spent on this one task, and nothing else. The author sets aside long, uninterrupted chunks of time to complete this singular

task. While this approach works well in some cases, it's probably not realistic for individuals with multiple job duties.

The bimodal approach

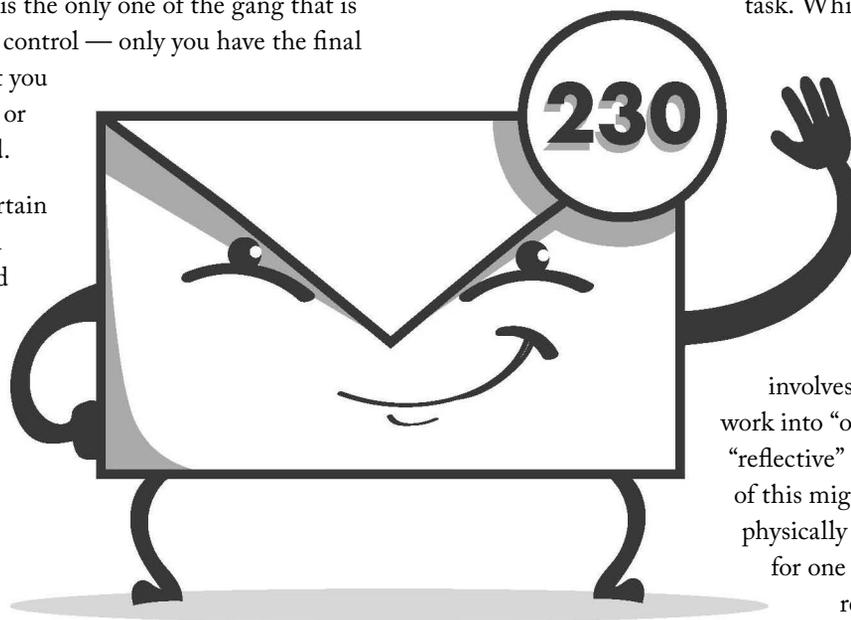
involves dividing your work into "open" times and "reflective" times. An example of this might be working physically in your office for one week and then

retreating to a cabin to focus on deep project work for another week. While you might be thinking, "That works for me!," I'm not so sure your supervisor would agree.

Therefore, the rhythmic and

journalistic philosophies are probably better suited for the kind of work we do in human resources. The rhythmic approach to deep work consists of setting aside a consistent timeframe every day or every week to do certain tasks. Maybe you've noticed a certain time of the day or week is quieter for you than others. In this case, you could schedule some focused project work during that block of time each day or week.

The journalistic approach involves shifting to meaningful work when time presents itself. One way to do this would be to look at your weekly schedule and pick a time to work on particular projects. For example, you notice at the beginning of the week that you have a three-hour block of time available on Wednesday morning. You could then schedule a project work session for that time period, and then do your best to minimize distractions.



A recent study out of UC-Irvine found that a typical office worker gets 11 minutes between interruptions, while it takes an average of 23 minutes to return to focus on a task.

And yes, even if you plan to do meaningful work at a certain time, emergencies, fires and a supervisor's or customer's priority can put your best laid plans on the back burner. Just remember, it's okay to be flexible, and it may take a few tries to find an approach that works well for you.

Create Rituals Around Work

Another way to minimize distractions throughout your workday is to create rituals around work. This is especially helpful for project-based or time-sensitive work. Decide beforehand where you will work and for how long. Will you allow yourself to access the internet while working? Some projects may not require it, and some may. Will you turn off your ringer or switch your office phone mode to "unavailable"?

Maybe you close out of Outlook for two hours while you focus on a certain task. Maybe you schedule brain breaks for 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes in the afternoon. We live in a time where we can find out anything we need to know within a matter of keystrokes, and while there's nothing wrong with that in and of itself, we need to remember the value in just taking time to think about the work we're doing and how we're doing it.

Regardless of what your "ritual" might be, simply having one can help sustain your focus and harness your energy for the task at hand.

Will This Really Work in My Line of Work?

As an HR professional you may be thinking, "But all of the supervillains of distraction you've mentioned here — phone calls, office drop-bys, email — are part of my job. Are you suggesting I only check email a couple of times a day? Do you think it's okay to not answer the phone when it rings? Can I really, in my line of work, sequester myself in my office or cubicle for extended periods of time?"

Of course I'm not suggesting that you never take a phone call or welcome an office visitor. We wouldn't be very friendly or efficient HR departments if we didn't take time to respond to and interact with those we serve and those with whom we work. What I am saying is that if you are in the middle of an important project or task that must get done, give yourself some time for deep work by employing some of the tactics outlined in this article that can help minimize distractions and maximize your focus and productivity. Just make sure your approach works for you personally and aligns with your office culture.

After all, when it comes down to it, a lot of email can wait, most phone messages aren't "return-within-the-hour" urgent, and "The 10 Most Fascinating Card Tricks" video on YouTube will still be there tomorrow. 

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