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By Heidi Adkisson

The person hovered over OmniFocus at the start of each day? Yes, that would be me. Rewind 20 years and there I am again, but this time lugging about a three-ring Franklin Planner. Suffice it to say that planning and I go *WAY* back.

But beyond daily planning, I've been working recently to optimize my overall work practice, thinking more intentionally about how I go about getting work done. I've been particularly interested in how I can maximize the focus and attention that I think is necessary to succeed in the design field (and, indeed, any field). In the past few months I've encountered three perspectives on this theme.

Perspective #1: Practical creativity

One of my favorite presentations at the recent ConveyUX conference was Dan Saffer on Practical Creativity. He maintains that you need to think consciously about building the creative habit—to practice rituals small and large that help you do your most creative work. Dan's talk was framed within his personal journey—from feeling creatively burned out a few years ago, to the fresh start he's experiencing today. He's found it helpful to have a short "start work" ritual that helps get him in the right mindset, which in his case includes preparing a cup of tea. To push boundaries, he suggests being just 10% more courageous in your thinking—that this small increment feels more manageable than the pressure to be completely revolutionary. And he believes that procrastination is not always a bad thing—that time away from a problem can productively disrupt your thinking. Even a short walk around the office can have you return to your desk with a fresh perspective.

Perspective #2: Creating flow with omnifocus

I read this book at the top of the year and honestly, my initial reaction was that the author, a psychiatrist, was completely overthinking his daily workflow. But I'm one of those people that won't walk out of even a terrible movie, so I soldiered on in my reading—and was very glad that I did. The rather extreme example of his OmniFocus use ultimately has helped me use the system more effectively. And, as the title indicates, this text eventually came around to tips for getting into a state of flow, actionable steps for overcoming procrastination (of the YouTube cat video variety), and establishing an "end work" routine that allows you to more easily pick up where you left off.

Perspective #3: The organized mind

This work by the neuroscientist Daniel Levitin uses neuroscience to explain the everyday challenges we face to keep it all together, particularly in our connected, always-on world. Our brain's attentional system evolved to focus on one thing at a time—a handy attribute when our ancestors were facing predatory threats—not so handy today with so many things competing for our attention. The science clearly indicates that successful multitasking (no surprise) is a myth. Levitin's work quite directly dovetails with David Allen's Getting Things Done (GTD) methodology—the idea of using trusted systems outside your brain to capture ideas, to-do's, and appointments. This leaves your brain freer to focus on a single task at hand. I can't nearly do this book justice in a paragraph, but I highly recommend it as an illuminating, enjoyable read.

For me these three perspectives converged in interesting ways that helped me refine my work practice. These include the following:

- Practicing a short ritual that gets me ready for work.
- Recommitting to capturing ideas as they occur to me.
- Giving my brain periodic breaks during the workday—quiet time away from the problem at hand.
- Establishing a routine that "closes down" work, leaving it in a state that makes it easier to pick up at a later point.

There is always the risk that you can overthink your workflow to the extent that creating just the right circumstance for work becomes a mode of procrastination. And I also believe it's a mistake to wait until you are "motivated" to tackle a particular task (articulated well in Screw Motivation, What You Need is Discipline).

I think of establishing a work practice in terms of the following:

1. Understanding what current science says.
2. Recognizing personal preferences.
3. Thinking in terms of what practices will provide the greatest bang for the time invested.

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