



THE HIDDEN TAX OF CONSTANT AVAILABILITY



With the convenience of modern technology, professionals seem to find it effortless to respond to colleagues, managers, clients, family, learning groups, and various social circles at any moment. However, we must be cautious of being "Always On". This includes behavioural patterns such as subconsciously checking communication apps to ensure you "look" online, constantly running a to-do list at the back of your mind which prevents deep relaxation and/or feeling uneasy or believing you "should" be doing something productive. This can lead to **cognitive overload**. When the brain assumes it must constantly respond to potential messages, it cannot enter "recovery mode," leading to mental health issues and **burnout**.

Sophie Leroy (University of Minnesota)¹ discovered that human attention does not function like an on/off switch. When you are writing a report (**Task A**) and suddenly receive a message on Teams or WhatsApp (**Task B**), even if you just "glance" at it before switching back, your cognitive resources do not fully transition. Your brain splits in two: one part responds to the message, while the other remains entangled in the logic of the report.

This is related to the Zeigarnik Effect in Psychology. If Task A is interrupted (e.g., an unread email or an unsolved problem), the brain marks it as "incomplete" and continues to run it as a

background process. According to Leroy's theory, every brief notification is a costly instance of **Attention Residue**. Even if we spend only 30 seconds replying to a message, the brain requires significantly more time to clear the residual information from the previous task. This continuous "**cognitive leakage**" is the fundamental reason modern professionals feel mentally exhausted².



COMPARISON OF MENTAL STATES

BRAIN OPERATING MODE

Single-threaded; resources fully concentrated.

Multiple task residues; excessive background processes.

STATE



DEEP WORK



ALWAYS ON

MENTAL ENERGY CONSUMPTION

Low
(Efficient and stable)

Extremely High
(Rapid overheating)

HOW TO MAINTAIN THE BRAIN AND RESTORE MENTAL ENERGY

(I) Psychological Detachment (by Sabine Sonnentag³)

The core concept of Psychological Detachment can be achieved through the following four methods:

- 1 Rituals:** Establish clear "end-of-work" rituals (e.g., changing clothes, listening to music) to tell your brain that work is over. For those working from home (WFH), it is recommended to wear professional attire during work hours and switch to comfortable loungewear afterward.
- 2 Mastery Experiences:** Use mindfulness to live in and experience the moment. Engage in hobbies that require focus but are unrelated to work (e.g., cooking, exercising, or learning a musical instrument).
- 3 Relaxation Experiences:** Practice mindfulness, go for a walk, or read. Simply put, psychological detachment provides the brain with a true "power-off" button rather than just staying on standby.
- 4 The Pomodoro Technique:** Take a 5-minute "True Break" every 25 minutes. This 5-minute break forces the brain to perform a brief "reboot." This time should not be used for checking messages; instead, leave your seat, stay away from screens, breathe deeply, or stretch to ensure both "visual" and "cognitive" offline states.

(II) If Your Job Requires Being on Constant Standby

If your role necessitates immediate responses to various situations, you can adopt these strategies:

- **Ready-to-Resume Notes:** Before moving to another task or entering a new meeting, take 1–3 minutes to jot down what you're currently working on. This serves as a "temporary processing" step to reduce the impact of attention residue.
- **Implement "Batch Processing":** Do not check emails or communication apps constantly during active work. Set 2–3 fixed time slots per day dedicated to processing messages, ensuring you can engage in **Deep Work** during other times.

In the era of information explosion, the "**ability to filter**" is far more important than the "**ability to acquire**." If you would like to discuss these methods further, please feel free to contact us.

References:

- Leroy, S. (2009). Why is it so hard to do my work? The challenge of attention residue when switching between work tasks. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.
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