Tech Toolbox: Getting Focused with Contextual Computing

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce

We all know that one of the biggest threats to productivity is distraction. Despite conventional wisdom (and our understandable but misguided desire to believe — or at least hope — that we can accomplish too many things in a limited time), our brains are *not* good at multitasking. Every time we switch our attention from one track to another, it not only creates a cognitive burden but disrupts our attention and derails our trains of thought right when we may be in the middle of a solid burst of productivity.

Most of us know the feeling of having a writer's block suddenly dissolve, allowing us to express some important idea in a meaningful way. But you can lose your state of flow just as easily — staying in that groove means keeping your focus. And *that* means avoiding distractions.

When we were in law school, we understood this implicitly. We knew that we needed some quiet place to study and took precautions to ensure that our focus would remain undisturbed. But many of us have lost sight of the importance of focus when doing work in the world of corporate law. We allow — sometimes even invite — distractions. Email and DM alerts and unscheduled meetings and phone calls constantly vie for our attention.

On top of that, we have trained ourselves to expect and even desire distractions. We start to do research on our topic with the best of intentions, and then go haring off on some interesting sidetrack. (How many calories are in a smoothie, anyway?) Or we take a "brief" break to check in on social media, news, or sports, only to find that many minutes or even hours have passed. If we are back in the office, we may get up to stretch our legs only to find ourselves pulled away from our work by non-work-related conversations with colleagues.

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I'm not saying that any or all of these are bad all the time. In fact, there are times when the best thing you can do to avoid burnout or reset your brain is to take some kind of break. Indeed, that's what the pomodoro technique is all about — taking a break to refresh your ability to focus. But it's critical to be able to keep your focus on the work you actually need to get done when you are in the midst of it.

Part of achieving this is just developing self-discipline and better concentration. Like most things, it takes practice and intentionally developing good work habits. But many of the distractions that tug at us involve the technology we use, and that technology has become both pervasive and invasive. We need some way to reduce the noise level from our tools so they don't just become distraction devices.

There are a lot of ways to do that, and I have written before about some of them, like changing your [email alert defaults](#).

But a big way to maintain your focus is to take advantage of something pretty new.

Contextual computing

Contextual computing involves having your various devices behave differently depending upon the context in which you are using them. So, for example, you may always plan to turn on a do not disturb setting that eliminates calls and message alerts while you are in meetings. That's great when you remember to do it — and on the right device — but wouldn't it be better if your smartphone, tablet, etc. automatically did that whenever your calendar indicated you were in a meeting?

But let's take that concept one step further. Suppose you could trigger a specific group of settings for particular contexts designed to ensure your ability to get something done and avoid unnecessary distractions.

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Let's say you intend to write a critical memo for an important client. You know that there are certain apps you will need, like your browser, a word processor, maybe a mindmap tool, perhaps your pomodoro timer, and the specific email from your client that triggered the assignment. And there are other apps or instances you don't need and could distract you: social media apps or sites, your general mailbox, IM or DM apps, your phone, tabs in your browser that don't pertain to your project, etc. And let's also acknowledge that you need to be able to get alerts for critical communications from particular VIPs like I mentioned above.

Now suppose the apps (you either need or don't want) and the list of VIPs are fairly consistent whenever you are writing an important memo. Wouldn't it help you be even more productive if you had a switch to turn these settings on and off just by triggering a set of commands for the context you call "Memo Writing"?

Well, that is the idea behind contextual computing. You pick a set of contexts that might benefit from a more focused approach — memo writing, research, email processing, meetings, family or other personal time, etc. — and then you selectively choose which apps and VIPs have permission to be enabled in that context.

Setting it up

Sounds interesting, you say, but how do we actually do that? One way, which is a little primitive and laborious, is to have a checklist for each context, and then manually go into your devices and close the applications on the disable list and open the ones on the enable list, doing the same thing with your various alerts so that only the enabled apps and your VIPs can get through.

Another approach, if you are nerdy enough, is to use an app like Keyboard Maestro for Mac, AutoHotKey for Windows, or Shortcuts for iOS (and in September, your Shortcuts will also work for Mac) to trigger a whole set of commands using just a few keyboard prompts that would do the appropriate enabling and disabling. That is both harder and more interesting than it sounds.

But here is the good news: this fall, both Mac Monterey and iOS/iPadOS 15 are getting a feature called [Focus](#) that will allow you to easily create various contexts and granularly control the apps and alerts you enable and disable in each. Not only that, but if you trigger a Focus on any one of your Apple devices, it will propagate that command set across all of your others. So, for example, if you turn on Memo Writing on your Mac, it will apply the same set of constraints to your iPhone and iPad. Here is how Apple describes it:
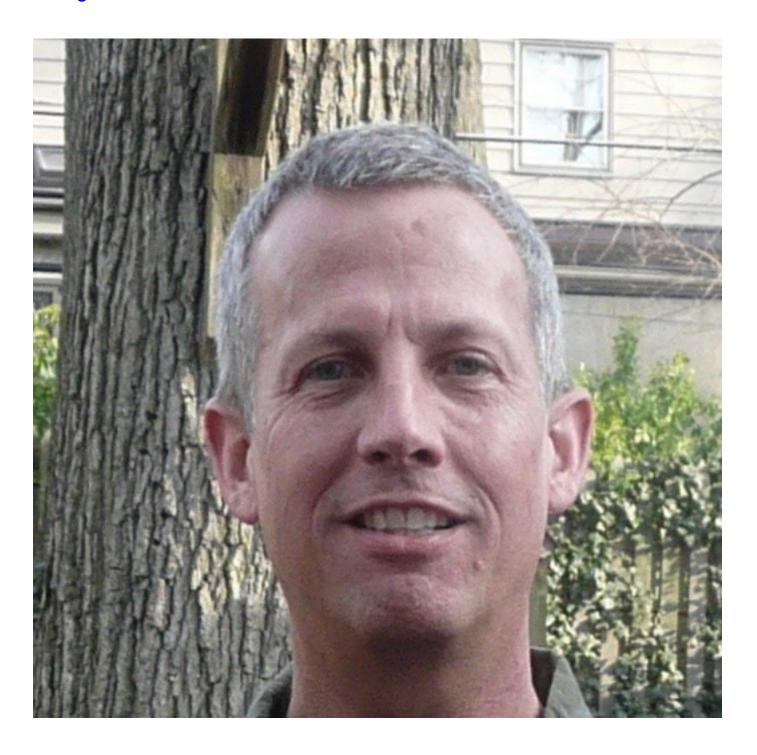
> iOS 15 delivers powerful tools that help users focus and reduce distraction. Focus is a new feature that filters notifications and apps based on what a user wants to focus on. Customers can set their device to help them be in the moment by creating a custom Focus or selecting a suggested Focus, which uses on-device intelligence to suggest which people and apps are allowed to notify them. Focus suggestions are based on users' context, like during their work hours or while they're winding down for bed, and when Focus is set on one Apple device, it automatically applies to their other Apple devices. Users can create Home Screen pages with apps and widgets that apply to moments of focus to only display relevant apps and reduce temptation. When a user's Focus is blocking incoming notifications, their status is automatically displayed to others in Messages, reflecting that a user is not currently reachable.

Windows also has a contextual computing solution, although it isn't nearly as comprehensive — yet. Their [Focus Assist](#) mode allows you to granularly control the notification alerts you receive. You cannot (yet) specify different settings for different contexts or automatically launch and quit specific apps like you can on the Apple platform, but I suspect they will follow Apple with a similar solution

soon if there is enough interest.

And there should be! Our attention is one of our most valuable attributes, and we can no longer afford to waste it by chasing every distraction or diversion our beloved but too busy devices try to wave in front of us. We need to ensure that our devices help us stay focused and make our jobs easier, not harder. I believe contextual computing is a very promising next step in that direction.

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