Organized Self: Expert Neuroscience Tips For Using Your iPhone Most Effectively

Steve Jobs had a mercurial temperament. He may or may not have had ADHD, but his greatest creation, the iPhone, has enabled habits that verge on that diagnosis for hundreds of millions of users. Think of the image of Jobs holding up the first iPhone with a mere 15 icons on its home screen. Contrast that to Tim Cook holding the new iPhone 6 Plus with 23 icons and simultaneously wearing a pre-release Apple Watch with another 27 tiny icons. In the seven years of the iPhone’s evolution, the number of icon slots on the home screen has increased by 40% (from 20 to 28.) What Steve wrought is information overload for Tim.
Information overload was the recurring theme at a conference I recently attended in Boston. “Focused, Organized Minds: Using Brain Science to Engage Attention in a Distracted World” was presented by Learning & the Brain to an audience primarily composed of educators. Everyone there seemed to be confronting the same challenge. As information becomes more plentiful, attention becomes scarce. Digital technology—iPhones in particular—have brought this conflict to a head. Our heads, in fact.

The iPhone is at once the control center of our digital lives and a continual source of distraction. And our own brains are much the same. Our prefrontal cortex has evolved to allow us to focus our attention on the task at hand, but our senses are continually assessing our environment for dangers or pleasures that can unseat those tasks. The habits that we need to develop to make the best use of our technology are the same habits of mind that help us manage our own neurology. This point is made abundantly clear in Daniel Levitin’s book *The Organized Mind* (http://www.amazon.com/The-Organized-Mind-Thinking-Information/dp/052595418X). Levitin was one of the keynote speakers at the conference and I was able to interview him there.

*The Organized Mind* is a valuable resource for managers and educators alike. Levitin pairs the accepted wisdom of contemporary neuroscience with his lifelong observations of what he calls HSPs (highly successful people.) The book is scrupulously annotated (unobtrusively in the back) to make it clear that this is a work of science, not opinion. Levitin is also careful not fill the book with wild speculations from the cutting edge of neuroscience. Consequently, the approach is almost disarmingly comfortable—not a paradigm shift but an engagement with the current paradigm of surprising depth.

recently, so I will not reprise them here. Instead I want to follow up on my conversation with Levitin about how he does—and does not—use his iPhone to organize his mind. One important point in The Organized Mind is an appreciation for the diversity of our neurology. There are many different techniques to achieve the same result that work differently for different people. What is important is to find what works for you—and stick with it.

Before talking about Levitin’s own organizational systems, let me bring up one of the central concepts in the book: the “junk drawer.” This catchall is embodied in your kitchen or office drawer where you stash those things that are beyond immediate characterization. Although this may seem like the height of disorganization, Levitin contends that having a pressure valve in the categorization process is highly efficient. Of course, this only works if the junk drawer is a part of your organizational system, not that system itself!

Organization itself can be an obsessive compulsion. OCD is a social disorder because it can lead people to place unexpected weight on trivial things. Similar to Levitin’s recommendation not to give decisions more time than they are worth, you don’t want to set up a mental category or physical file folder that contains just a single item. The overhead of the organization system is then out of scale with what the system contains. This is a useful rule of thumb to keep in mind when trying to become more organized: keep the effort of creating and maintaining a system in line with its benefits.