



The Right To Focus

How to take back our power against technology in our workplaces.

An Overview

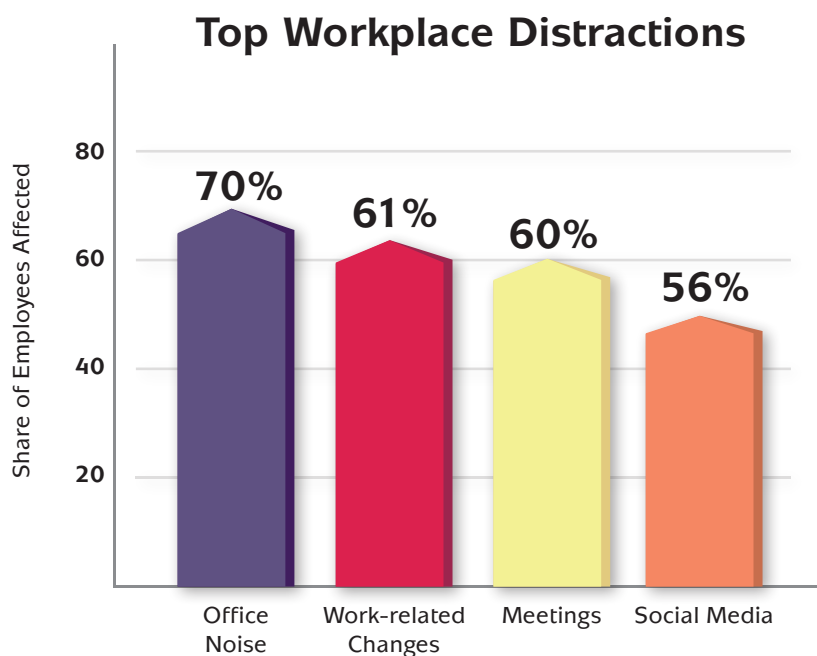
Focus, it's something we all need to accomplish our goals. But what happens when we can't find the focus we desire in our workplaces? This is a struggle many graphic designers are now finding themselves in as we enter this technology driven age. Spilling over into every facet of our lives, we have succumbed to the life of distractions and notifications that keep us in a chokehold of shallow, meaningless work. With our smartphones and social media needing to be checked constantly, and the pressure to work on multiple tasks at once, our creativity and performance are suffering. Not to mention the dread we all have of walking into a toxic, stressful office every morning. But if the environments we work in do not support our creative endeavors, what chance do we have at creating deep, meaningful work?

The reality of the graphic design industry is that it's important to create work that represents our brand and creative skills well. The only way to stand out in this crowded industry is by creating high-level work that is professional and solves the design problem at hand. Designers are usually tasked with creating work that looks new and modern but also must follow brand guidelines, all finished within a tight deadline. This usually leaves designers stressed and feeling like they must design in solitude or learn to think more abstractly to solve these design problems. But the truth is, we would be able to create much better work just by shutting out the distractions around us. Once we can silence the constant notifications of technology near us, our world will get quieter and focus and deep work will come naturally. Even limiting our task switching can help us block out chunks of time in our day to start and finish one task at a time. A game changer for the way most of us work now. Lastly, we need to limit our time in stressful environments, and urge our workplace to create a stable, calm, and stress-free office. This will help not just graphic designers, but all their co-workers they interact with as well.



With workplace distractions at an all-time high, its concerning to imagine that the majority of Americans working are in a distracted state. According to a Zippa statistic done, **79% of employees report being distracted at work**. What's worse, is that every time we are distracted, it will take us **around 23 minutes to get back on track** and focus on said task. With all the daily interruptions, it not surprising that designers are suffering to produce, and businesses are struggling to stay afloat. Zippa also reported that most **U.S. businesses lose about 650 billion dollars annually** because of distracted workers. A number that will only increase as our lives become busier and filled with more technology.

If graphic designers in the workplace want to succeed and reach the right clients, they need to be able to know when and where to counteract their worst distractions. Only then will they reach their flow states to work at their most optimized level.



Challenges In The Industry

There are many challenges of working in today's design industry, but as demand for graphic designers increase, there will be more likelihood of distraction and error in work being produced. While everyone needs to be able to do deep work to achieve their goals, it's a struggle to get there because of many bad habits.

We will never be able to reach deep focus and flow needed in the graphic design industry without first eliminating interruptions and stress in our workspaces. The first and most common distraction in a graphic designer's workplace is the constant interruptions and notifications. Our personal cell phones as well as our work devices have us constantly connected and always accessible to others. While at first this may feel productive, we now know that it does the opposite and just distracts us from our current tasks. Another common occurrence is workers task switching throughout the day. This happens to the best of us, usually by taking on too much work and then trying to multi-task. But no matter how much we may go back and forth, it will always take twice as long to finish, simply because our brains are not designed to do such a thing. The graphic design industry can also fall victim to becoming a stressful work environment. While they may not start out that way, many offices put their bottom lines first, before their workers. This ultimately creates a space where workers feel stressed to over perform daily, which impacts the work they produce and how they feel about their job.



What Can Better Focus Accomplish?



We know focus is important, but do we know what it is? The definition of **focus** is considered the center of interest or activity. This goes hand in hand with our attention, and according to Johann Hari who wrote the book *Stolen Focus*, this current “human-made” attention crisis we are experiencing can be thought of like a spotlight. When we are only concerned with what’s in our spotlight, it can help us focus on the task while drowning out the outside noise. But when the spotlight is not defined, it can lead to distraction.

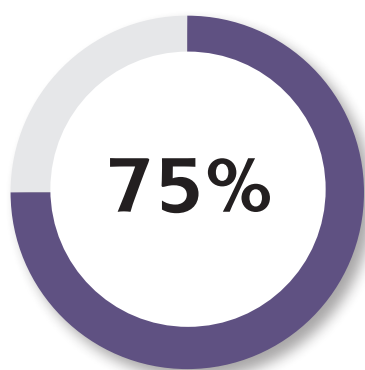
Flow states are important to today’s graphic designers because it’s a moment where we can focus deeply, where time is moving quickly, and we can get our best work done. This state can only happen when we choose to do one task at a time. Entering a flow state means we can get a lot done with the least amount of mental effort. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, who has done countless hours of research on flow states has determined that we can reach this state of mind with practice and patience. When we find that activity or work we love, finding that flow state will follow.

Once you have better focus and enter a flow state, graphic designers can start producing **deep work**. A term first coined by Cal Newport, describing it as the act of focusing without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. These deep work moments are what separates high quality work from the mundane. Once a designer reaches a flow state, they have a better chance of getting into more in the future, meaning that deep focus and flow is something we can all learn and get better at.

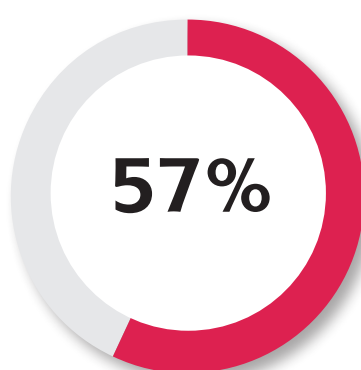
Without flow states, projects will take longer to create, and they may not solve the overall design problem it was trying to work out. This can lead to multiple rounds of revisions for graphic designers, which just leads to more work and missed deadlines! With that, stress will rise, leading to even worse projects being produced. It can become a never-ending cycle of back and forth with clients and co-workers. But when workers focus and reach flow states, it means the work they produce will be of better quality and more creative. Not only will the work improve, but the designers themselves will feel more accomplished, have improved mental health and have overall better wellbeing.

Within the graphic design industry, you will find that all designers are extremely passionate about their careers and truly love what they do. This reinforces that there is hope for creating an environment where flow states can become normal in the everyday. With passion for their craft combined with challenging work, the graphic design industry should be a leader, where flow states are encouraged and uninterrupted. Creating an enjoyable environment will lead to outstanding creative projects and problem solving that seemed unreachable before.

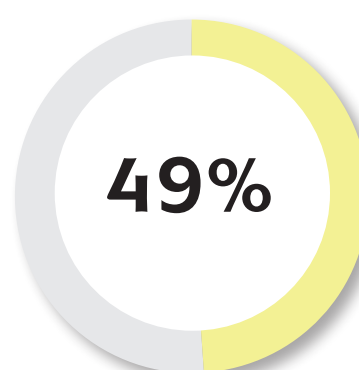
With less distractions & more focus workers...



...Get more done and are more productive.



...Are motivated to do their best.

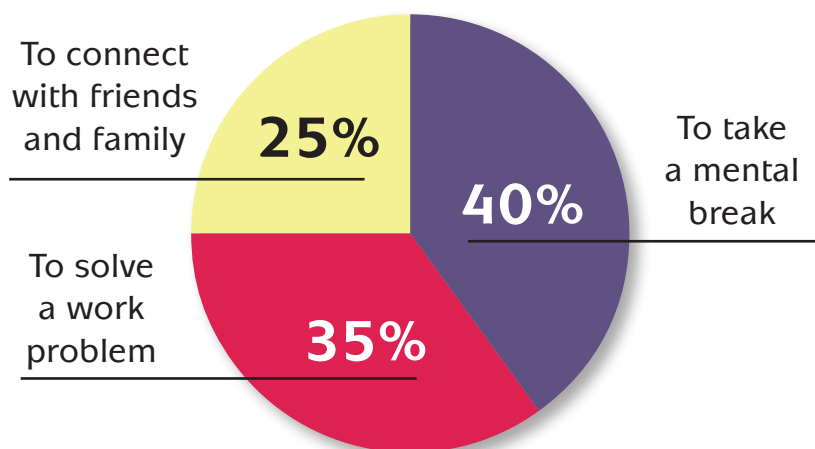


...Feel happier at work.

Productivity Issues

Our productivity cannot thrive in an environment where our phones are constantly alerting us about almost everything. But because the graphic design industry is usually found in an office setting, the **constant notifications** almost double because workers are constantly being interrupted by work emails, instant messages, and phone calls. Zippa.com found that around 98% of workers have at least three to four interruptions per day. That means every day, workers are losing hours getting off course. It also doesn't help that most of us are addicted to our phones and tend to scroll on social media when needing a break. It was found that **employees spend an average of 56 minutes doing non-work-related activities on their cell phones** every workday. Our phones may be our go to for stress relief, but we must realize how damaging it is for our long-term focus. The more we need these distractions, the harder it will be to concentrate for longer periods of time.

Reasons Employees use phones at work:



Task switching is another quality usually applied to office work that most people think helps them accomplish more. Yet we have been fooled because task switching usually happens once we have been interrupted and decide to jump into a new task to complete. It has been shown that our brains cannot really handle doing anything more than one thing at a time. As quoted in *Stolen Focus*: “...we invented a myth. The myth is that we can actually think about three, five, ten things at the same time.” Research done by Earl Miller proved that while our brains may make us feel that switching tasks is all one single stream of consciousness, what’s really happening is that our brains are reconfiguring with each new movement, and that will come at a cost of decreased concentration. Most of us are accustomed to switching tasks but it is ruining our path into a flow state and creating deep work.

Another major productivity issue is a **stressful workplace environment**. It’s a place we all hope to avoid in our professional lives, but sometimes graphic designers can find themselves in a creative role that is deadline driven or workspaces that are noisy, rather than calming. This can trigger a state called hypervigilance, which is when our brain is focused on the danger that may be ahead, rather than being present in the moment. These types of environments can be dangerous because when we feel stressed, we tend to struggle to focus, even long after the stressful situation has passed. These environments also increase nervousness and keep our brains thinking about how to survive when we should be focusing on solving design problems. Daily stress can lead to burn out and low job satisfaction in designers, making them feel like they aren’t valued at the company. Creating a place where workers feel they are getting recognized for their great work can help the overall company’s morale and boost confidence across departments.

Hypervigilance is

“...when you’re looking out for potential danger, as opposed to being focused on being present with what’s going on...”

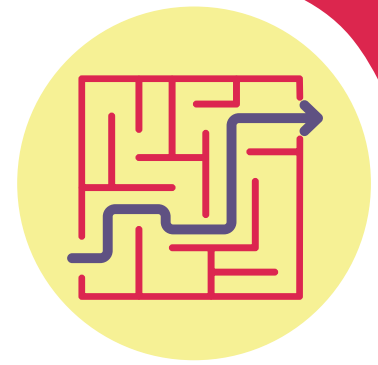
The Solution

The impact of distractions on individual workers and organizations is that our minds have become so diverted we cannot find time to complete our work and meet deadlines anymore. With so much wasted time in our day there isn't space to get into a flow state, or to produce work that represents our industry well. The constant pings of notifications, jumping from task to task, and stressful scenarios make it hard to know where to start implementing these changes. But with **the global graphic design market worth over \$48 billion**, it's important we make the switch now! Creating a non-distracted environment, workers will be more relaxed and more engaged in their daily work. Designers will also be focused and more creative during this time. The stretch of uninterrupted work will allow us to think more abstractly and come up with design solutions clients will be impressed with.

My three solutions for designers in the workplace are:

1 | **To limit phones and social media time** during work hours.

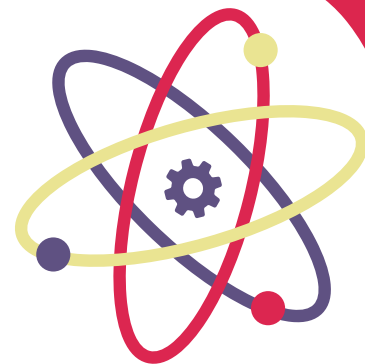
For most of us, this means putting your phone away and out of sight, so you're not tempted to pick it up. Just having our devices near us make us more likely to start using them because our brains want that instant dopamine hit. Apps that have infinite scroll will continuously give us more content to consume without us realizing how much time we have wasted. So, to combat this we must first silence all the notifications and instant messages we get by using the do not disturb button. In fact, Julia Brailovskaia and her team at the Mental Health Research and Treatment Center at Ruhr University Bochum in Germany, conducted a study and proved that when workers spent less time on social media, they felt less overworked and were more committed to their jobs! But the group in the study that was allowed to use social media found that their work received poorer results, and they had worse mental health.



2 | Limit unnecessary task switching and limiting meetings in the middle of a workday. When our time to design is broken up, it forces us to switch what parts of our brains we are using. Limiting unnecessary meetings and changes in tasks can help us to stay focused on the project at hand. With an office worker having an average of 25 meetings a week, there is major room for improvement in time management and monotasking. Once we master working on one thing at a time, getting into a flow state will be that much easier. In fact, multi-tasking will surely kill any flow state because our brain is not made to jump from one thing to another. It has been proven that around 97.5% of people cannot multitask effectively, and when we do try, 20% of our cognitive ability is lost! It is important to schedule your workday where one project is set up for an allotted time. This can mean setting up the most important project in the morning and working on smaller tasks in the afternoon. Or having days on the calendar that are no-meeting days and used for focus time only.

3 | Creating a workplace that limits stress and is a positive place to work. Since most companies want to recruit and maintain top level employees, this should be a priority in all organizations. Limit social media by having a policy in place during work hours, and foster a peaceful environment where workers feel safe to express themselves. This means designers feel comfortable going to their managers with any issues and feel comfortable to think “outside the box” to solve problems. Studies have even been shown that a calm work environment positively impacts productivity. When designers enter a quiet and organized space, it lets them become fully immersed in their work. The difference between noisy and calm surroundings will be evident in the work being produced. The benefits of a calm workspace also help the employees when they get home. They don’t feel exhausted or stressed, allowing them to recharge fully at night and come in the next day rejuvenated. This change can benefit all the employees and the organization’s stability.

Getting Into More Flow States



As we now know, flow states are an important part of creating the deep work we all desire to make. The psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi said it best, it is “the secret of happiness” to reach this elusive state in our brain. The good news is that we all have this ability to focus for long stretches of time and even to enjoy it. We just need to create the right circumstances around us.

Csíkszentmihályi has given us a break down of how exactly we get into a flow state. The first step is to **choose a clearly defined goal for yourself**. This will define the one task you choose to do. No other distractions or smaller tasks should be included. This focus on one task will require all your brain power and adding more than one task will just dilute it. Second, you must **pick something that has meaning to you**. A task that you love or are interested in will be best. This is the secret to having great attention - we will always be more attentive to something that is meaningful to us. When any task lacks this meaning, our brains will lose interest and naturally it will be harder to stay focused. The third step is to do **a task that is at the edge of your abilities**. This means it should be challenging but not too difficult for you. We don't want the goal to be too easy that our brains go into auto pilot, but we also don't want it to be too difficult that we feel anxious and give up. Pick a goal to push you to the edge of what you think you can do.

Once we are able to find a goal, find meaning in it, and push our abilities, we will be able to reach a flow state. We know we have reached it because it is a “distinctive mental state”, as described by Johann Hari in *Stolen Focus*. Csíkszentmihályi also described it as “a high level of concentration, a sense of control, and decreased

rumination or worry, with a clear goal and immediate feedback. It is also accompanied by an altered sense of time, as we fail to notice the minutes or hours flying by.” Most people who have experienced flow states will remember them, and recount them in awe. Meaning that the state our brains are in, are really life changing and improve our well-being.

Other helpful ways to enter a flow state have been noted as well. They are to remove stress and to find ways to manage it. **Most stressful brains won't be able to function as well as a calm ones.** It is also recommended to find rituals that reinforce the correct mindset before starting the task. This could be ritual movements, like stretches before doing a sport or wearing a certain item of clothing before every practice. What this does, is set up a habit loop in your brain. Almost like setting your brain up for success by telling it “Ok were going to do some deep work in a minute”. Your brain will start to recognize these cues and will be able to slip back into a flow state because it recognizes these patterns.

While it is easy to become overambitious, **it's important to remember to not stretch ourselves too thin.** In today's day in age, it's common for designers to feel they need get multiple projects done immediately, especially when clients are aggressive and ask to see the work before its actually done. It may be tempting to work harder and to constantly be in a work state. But this will only create more stress and frustration within. It's also important for graphic designers to remember that competition is not welcome in flow states either. This can be just as disruptive as distractions. We should not worry how we measure up to other designers or what others will say about our work. Focusing on the work itself should be the main and only priority. When that happens, we will be able to see the transformation within us and our work.

“The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”

- Mihály Csíkszentmihályi

The Workplace of the Future

When implementing these changes into our workplaces, we can expect the graphic design industry to change dramatically. Designers will be able to focus more and become more efficient in their work processes. Being more productive means producing more work in less time, which usually means the business is creating more revenue. This also balances the company's return on investment because they are getting a lot more value out of the efforts of their employees. This increase in productivity can be measured by the speed of work being produced and the accuracy of the end project. I believe that with more focus, graphic designers will be able to have less revisions on their work as well as being able to think more creatively with less distractions. With less resources being wasted, these changes will create a company that runs smoothly, meets deadlines, and employs high value designers.

I also believe these changes will create an inviting office environment with gleeful workers who work well together. Meaning that workers will enjoy coming into the office and enjoy their work that much more. Happier workers means that company retention will improve and in turn, increased productivity. Departments will have less staff shortages and no time will be wasted getting a new employee "up to speed". This allows designers to feel more comfortable around each other, allowing themselves to share ideas in a calm, supportive environment rather than one that is quick to shut down new concepts. Collaborative projects will become easier on everyone and it may even start to happen naturally.



Once one change is implemented, it will trickle down to every department and that can transform the entire organization. This is because when departments are doing well, others will take notice and put forth these changes to match their new surroundings. With these new adjustments in place, any office can fight against the distractions of today's technology and create an environment where their employees pay more attention to creating their best work.

If these changes aren't introduced into the creative workspace, we can expect to see higher turnover with designers and more disgruntled workers who can't problem solve. Without a space to be able to focus, designers will have a hard time crafting their projects and finding solutions to their client's jobs. They will become more frustrated and won't be as fulfilled... a serious problem for an industry where passion is usually the driving force. The work being produced may also not be up to the company's standards and may have errors that have been overlooked. Distracted workers won't just affect the inside of the organization, in the end, clients will also notice this lack of drive and be less likely to work with these companies in the future.

Organizations may try to create a more positive, collaborative environment or create personal goals for employees to reach, but they will be all unattainable if the workplace is full of interruptions. The alternative is a chaotic work environment where all graphic designers suffer creatively and feel underappreciated. A future full of better work opportunities for designers is possible, but making these changes throughout all organizations is the first step. Once we take accountability for how our workplaces have changed over the decades, we can start to make them more inclusive today.

Conclusion

As organizations continue to grow and expand, more employees are sure to feel the growing chaos of their working environment. It's only natural that adding more work and people into the mix will lead to more disturbances. But a successful company doesn't have to operate like this.

While some solutions for better focus in work environments lean on the individual's ability to change, it also comes from the company's willingness to help their employees. Letting employees shut off email notifications or signing off on a group chat should be allowed certain times during the day. Designers should then limit meetings to only specific times and try to limit interruptions from others by blocking time on the calendar for deep work sessions. Employers should also know how to create inviting, calm environments that support getting into a flow state for creativity. Creating masterful, finished projects can only begin to flourish when designers feel comfortable enough to express themselves around their co-workers.

Becoming a standout and successful graphic designer is possible when given the right tools and when we take time to spot our own weaknesses. We can only reach our creative pinnacles when we start to change our processes that aren't working for us. Then, our work will be able to speak for itself and allow clients to see our full creative potential. Today is where we can start to create better workplaces so that we can produce purposeful and professional work that stands out in the design world. With these steps we can easily transform the outlook and longevity of this industry for years to come.



References

“14 Strategies That Can Help Improve Efficiency of Employees.” *Indeed for Employers*, Indeed, www.indeed.com/hire/c/info/improve-employee-efficiency?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjw6c-63BhAiEiwAF0EH1Clv5a-f4f1Zabb409urzxrRnQv_PIPM2hb-nzdpX77DIJLvD1RhARoCc24QA-vD_BwE&aceid=&gclsrc=aw.ds. Accessed 7 Oct. 2024.

Ducharme, Jamie. “Why Our Attention Spans Seem to Be Getting Shorter.” *Time*, Time, 10 Aug. 2023, time.com/6302294/why-you-cant-focus-anymore-and-what-to-do-about-it/.

Duffy, Jill E. “How Much Time Do We Lose Task-Switching?” *PRODUCTIVITY REPORT*, 4 Mar. 2019, productivityreport.org/2016/02/22/how-much-time-do-we-lose-task-switching/.

Flynn, Jack. “17 Concerning Workplace Distraction Statistics [2022]: FACTS + Trends.” *Zip-pia For Employers*, 11 May 2023, www.zippia.com/employer/workplace-distraction-statistics/#:~:text=How%20many%20hours%20per%20workday,losing%20time%20to%20other%20things.

Hari, J. (2023). *Stolen focus: Why you can't pay attention—and how to think deeply again*. Crown.

Howarth, Josh. “21+ Brand New Graphic Design Statistics (2024).” *Exploding Topics*, Exploding Topics, 15 Dec. 2023, explodingtopics.com/blog/graphic-design-stats.

Latha, Madhu. “The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health in the Workplace.” *Wellness360 Blog*, 16 Aug. 2024, blog.wellness360.co/the-impact-of-social-media-on-mental-health/.

Lindner, Jannik. “Key Social Media at Work Statistics: Impact on Productivity.” *WiFiTalents*, 6 Aug. 2024, wifitalents.com/statistic/social-media-at-work/.

Olmstead, Kenneth. “Social Media and the Workplace.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 22 June 2016, www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/06/22/social-media-and-the-workplace/.

Robson, David. “The Flow State: The Science of the Elusive Creative Mindset That Can Improve Your Life.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 July 2024, www.theguardian.com/science/article/2024/jul/20/flow-state-science-creativity-psychology-focus.

Ruhr-Universitaet-Bochum. "Less Social Media Makes You Happier and More Efficient at Work, Says Study." *Phys.Org*, Phys.org, 15 Dec. 2023, phys.org/news/2023-12-social-media-happier-efficient.html.

"The Negative Effects of Stress in the Workplace." *Talkspace*, business.talkspace.com/articles/the-negative-effects-of-stress-in-the-workplace. Accessed 7 Oct. 2024.

Waltower, Shayna. "Why Distracted Workers Can Cost Your Business Money." *Business News Daily*, 23 Oct. 2023, www.businessnewsdaily.com/267-distracted-workforce-costs-business-es-billions.html.

Woolley, Kaitlin, and Marissa A. Sharif. "The Psychology of Your Scrolling Addiction." *Harvard Business Review*, 3 Feb. 2022, hbr.org/2022/01/the-psychology-of-your-scrolling-addiction.

"You're Working on a Long Project. How Can You Stay Focused and Productive?" *How to Stay Focused and Productive on Long Graphic Design Projects*, www.linkedin.com/advice/3/youre-working-long-project-how-can-you-stay-focused-6kp8e. Accessed 7 Oct. 2024.