

Research: How to Power Through Boring Tasks

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We all try to spend our days doing things that feel engaging — but the reality is, there’s a lot of boring work that must also be done. Whether it’s washing the dishes, filing papers, entering data, or any of the countless menial yet critical tasks that keep our homes, organizations, and communities running, we all have less-than-exciting tasks we have to do. Of course, it’s not always easy to get ourselves to persevere in these tasks, even if we know we should. What does it take to persist when work is boring?

Researchers have explored this question from many angles, seeking to understand how we can cultivate perseverance in ourselves and in those we care about. Studies have shown that people may persist longer when they monitor their progress, receive rewards, or when a task is made more fun. These findings have direct implications for how we design products and policies. For instance, electric toothbrush developers have started adding timers to their brushes, companies are increasingly offering incentives to encourage employees to get more exercise, and managers are implementing various gamification strategies to make employees’ work more fun.

My recent research, however, suggests that for tasks that don’t require a lot of attention, there may be a better approach. My coauthors and I conducted a series of studies with more than 2,000 participants and found that in many cases, people stop working on tasks prematurely not

because they aren't motivated enough, but because the tasks inherently do not demand enough attention. Oftentimes, strategies designed to increase persistence will involve changing something about the work itself — but you can only make washing the dishes so exciting or intellectually stimulating. Rather than endlessly attempting to make boring tasks less boring, it can sometimes be more effective instead to pair these activities with other tasks that demand more attention. We call this concept tangential immersion.

Why does this work? Fundamentally, the mind seeks to be engaged.

We experience boredom when doing tasks that require less attention than we have available, and this leads us to quit those tasks prematurely. But if there is a second activity in which we can immerse ourselves concurrently with the low-attention task, it can occupy that excess attention, reducing boredom and thus increasing persistence.

Tangential Immersion Decreases Boredom and Increases Persistence

We first documented this effect through a simple experiment designed to measure the impact of tangential immersion on how long participants brush their teeth. We informed participants that the longer they brushed, the cleaner their teeth would be, and then instructed them to brush for as long as they wanted. While they brushed, one group was shown a video clip of beautiful nature scenes accompanied by music and nature sounds, while the other group watched a much more immersive documentary video clip about bears and wolves. This small intervention made a big difference: On average, those who watched the more immersive video brushed their teeth 30% longer than those who watched the less immersive video.

Next, we were interested in comparing tangential immersion to some of the other common approaches to increasing persistence described above. In one study, we asked three groups of participants to do a simple physical exercise for as long as they could while concurrently doing a second activity: The control group looked at a dot moving across a screen, the second group looked at a pleasant underwater image and listened to piano music, and the third group read an immersive story. The participants who read an immersive story while doing the exercise persisted for 10% longer than those in the control group, whereas looking at a beautiful image accompanied by pleasant, but non-immersive music did not increase persistence (despite participants rating the experience as more enjoyable). In a supplemental study, we compared tangential immersion to progress monitoring by asking participants to do a simple typing task for as long as they could. Providing participants with a timer to track their progress increased persistence in the typing task — suggesting that monitoring your progress does indeed help — but we found that listening to an immersive audiobook increased persistence even more.

Finally, two additional studies explored a key limitation of this approach: People can really only pay attention to so much at one time. Because of this, tangential immersion only increases persistence if the two tasks together occupy most of — but not more than — one's total attentional capacity. Listening to an immersive audiobook boosted persistence for the simple typing task we used in the previous experiment, but when we asked participants to do a similar yet slightly more complex typing task, tangential immersion had no effect. Similarly, participants doing a simple physical exercise persisted longer when reading an immersive story, but not when performing attention-demanding arithmetic.

Putting Tangential Immersion to Work

So how can individuals, managers, and organizations start leveraging the power of tangential immersion? Many people already demonstrate an intuitive understanding of this effect in their personal lives — for instance, listening to immersive music or podcasts while at the gym is a great example of real-world tangential immersion. But there are also a lot of workplace situations in which both employees and their managers might benefit from this approach.

When it comes to menial office tasks, many employees use monitoring tools such as work timers to increase their persistence. In other cases, managers might rely on incentives such as extra time off or bonuses to motivate their employees. And to be sure, strategies like these certainly have a place — but our research suggests that especially for tasks that don't require much attention, tangential immersion may be more effective. That could mean encouraging workers to listen to an audiobook while filing paperwork, watch a video while cleaning their desks, or read a news article while stuffing envelopes.

Tangential immersion can also be a tool in the toolbox of leaders focused on boosting health and safety in their organizations. For instance, to encourage employees to wash their hands for longer, companies could place daily news stories on bathroom mirrors for employees to read. Similarly, managers could boost persistence in physical wellness initiatives such as step challenges by providing employees with free audiobooks to listen to while walking.

Finally, product teams can also benefit from incorporating these findings into their designs. If you're building a toothbrush app to increase brushing time, our research suggests that rather than simply offering a timer, developers might consider including two-minute immersive soundbites for users to listen to while brushing. Similarly, exercise apps could integrate audiobooks or podcasts into their platforms and encourage users to listen to this immersive content while working out. This could be a win-win for companies and customers, both helping users increase their fitness levels and leading them to use these apps for longer. Ultimately, for any company concerned with engaging and retaining customers, our studies highlight the importance of bundling activities together such that the product requires enough (but not too much) of users' attention — and that has implications for teams throughout the development lifecycle, from ideation to sales and marketing.

There's no escaping boring tasks. Of course, we should all do what we can to fill our jobs and lives with engaging activities — but given the prevalence and importance of low-attention work in our personal and professional lives (and the lives of our employees and customers), we all stand to benefit from finding ways to persist in these behaviors. Tangential immersion offers a simple yet effective strategy that can empower anyone to stick with the work they know they should be doing, boosting personal productivity, organizational success, and well-being on a societal level.