



ZOOMING IN AND ZOOMING OUT: BALANCING AWARENESS AND ATTENTION

Key points

1. The evolutionary basis of attention and awareness
2. Overusing of attention in virtual work
3. Dangers of not using awareness—less of imagination, creativity, embodiment
4. Grounded and present awareness – body and environmental

Attention and awareness

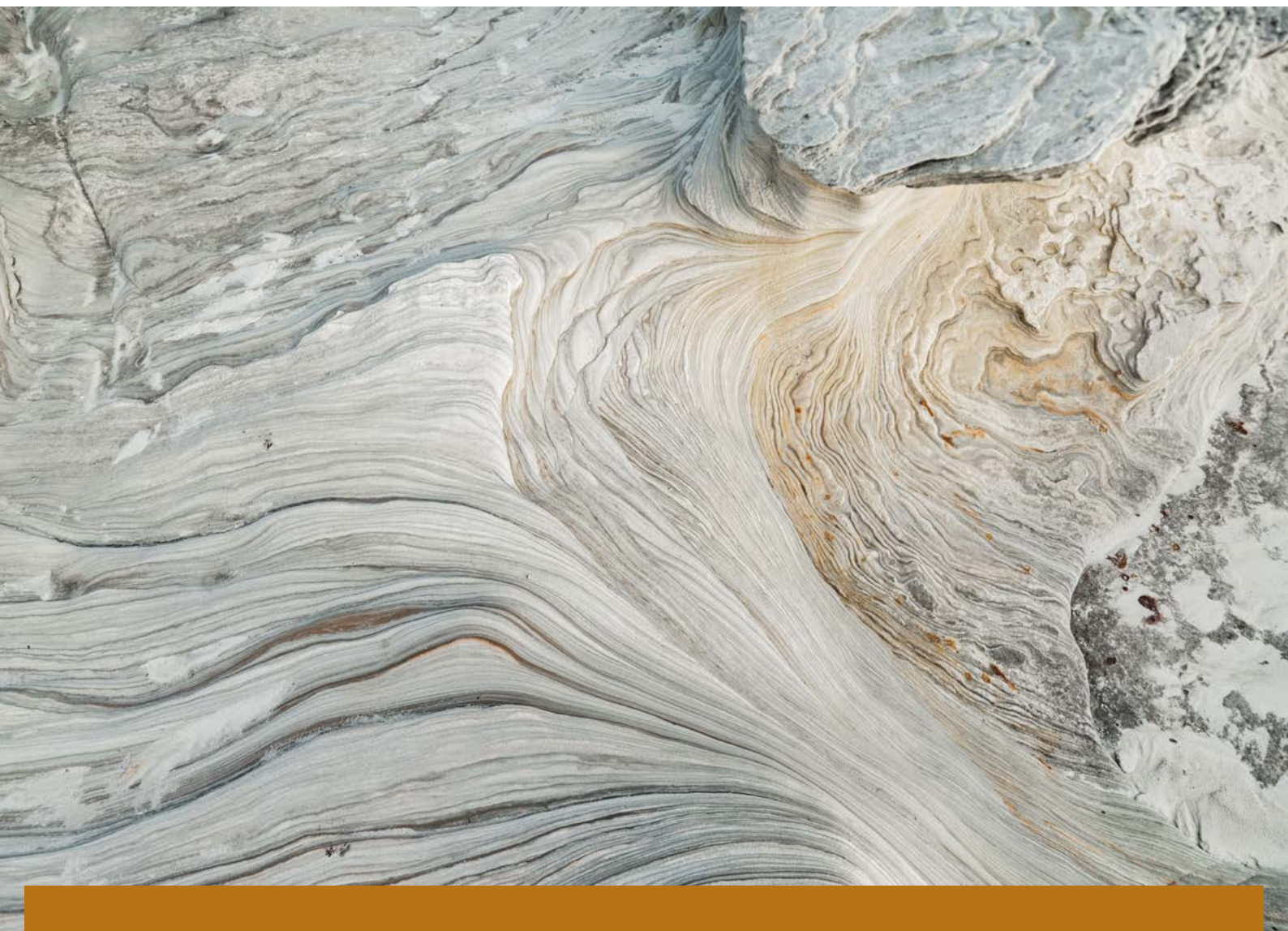
First, a small evolutionary excursion. We need two modes of how we attend to things to survive. A mammal who discovers a juicy worm in a hole needs to direct focused attention to extract the delicate morsel from the hole without losing it and then munching the juicy bits, perhaps discarding the unwanted pieces. This needs attention, focused perhaps on examining this new object, and a degree of detailed perception. At the same time, however, there needs to be a continual, broad awareness scanning for dangers – is there an eagle in the sky looking for its next meal? This awareness is much broader, taking in the whole at all times, and making connections (between a sound in the trees and potential danger). There is increasing evidence that these two forms of attention have fundamentally affected many mental processes and affect the characteristic functioning of different brain halves in different ways (McGilchrist I.,2019).

For example, the literal understanding of language and precision in a language tends to be more rooted in the left-brain half, whereas the understanding of metaphor, poetry and humour – and thus relational and whole understanding of language – is more characteristic of the right half of the brain.

It is also important to understand then that these two forms of attention have very different characteristics – attention apprehends, latches onto, dissects, takes apart and is self-focused (mine, for me etc.), whereas awareness sees the interconnections, is relational, apperceiving the whole and bigger patterns, and is other or we focused. A lot of modern working life requires focused attention, although increasingly, working in complex systems or collaborating broadly, has us engaged in our broader awareness. Some say that our modern age is characterised by an unhealthy left-brain focus, connected to an overuse of attention. The chart below shows some of the characteristics of Awareness vs. Attention.

Attention	Awareness
Isolates and analyses	Holistic, relational, contextual
Selects information from awareness	Filters all incoming information
Hones in on objects	Acts as a watchful alert system
More processing, slower response	Less processing, quicker response
More “self-centred”	Less personal and more objective

One very important point regarding the different forms of attention vs awareness – awareness, in general, operates primarily unconsciously – and processes vastly more information than our limited conscious focused attention can. This is why an overuse of attention/heightened emphasis on focus can make us blind to interconnections and larger scale perception. It also is important to understand that our unconscious processes are thus vastly more powerful – and actually direct attention most of the time. This will be familiar to anyone who has tried to practice mindfulness and cultivate a steady attention.



Overusing attention

Much has been written about attention in virtual work. What is not commonly mentioned is that virtual work results in an overuse of attention. This encompasses both very focused people – and those who struggle with focus.

In terms of focus, we have noticed a range of experiences. Some people have really struggled – left alone with many apps, e-mails, the seductive fridge, Netflix, calls, etc.. They have struggled to be effective and found that the normative effect of being in an office helped them avoid procrastination or fragmentation – in contrast when working from home it was difficult for them to set up habits of attention.

Others did not struggle – those that generally have good attentional control and are aware of limiting their internal distractions found that they worked a lot more effectively at home – since they were not exposed to external interruptions as much

A number of people have even reported their productivity increased by 20 to 30% – and using this time for more sports and relaxation. This is also what research on virtual work has shown – that those who are good at it or those who self-select to do it, can be 20-30% more productive working at home (Bloom, N. et al., 2014; Puranam, P. & Minervini, M., 2020). Our own survey of 200 people found that more than 40% felt their productivity increased a lot or somewhat, with less than 20% reporting a decrease.

Common to both of these – being focused or fragmented – is actually an overuse of attention – constantly placing our attention from one detailed object to another. Even someone who is distracted tends to have their attention attracted from one stimulating object to another, rather than being aware. This can be associated with a decline in collaborative and big picture skills – something early pioneers in virtual work have noted:

“PEOPLE ARE MORE PRODUCTIVE WHEN THEY’RE ALONE ... THEY’RE MORE COLLABORATIVE AND INNOVATIVE WHEN THEY’RE TOGETHER. SOME OF THE BEST IDEAS COME FROM PULLING TWO DIFFERENT IDEAS TOGETHER.”

MARISSA MAYER – YAHOO



Numerous studies have also shown this decline in collaboration and engagement (Sobel-Lojeski, K., 2015).

Underusing awareness


When we look out of a window at a distant object or when we walk in nature, we activate our awareness. This is also the case when we listen to music or when we are in a room with many people. There are so many levels of information reaching our senses – body postures, tone of voice, what is being said, etc. – this cannot be processed by our detailed attention – but is instead apperceived by our relational awareness and shows up in our conscious mind if we are emotionally or socially aware. This mode of attending is generally underused in our screen focused age – with consequences for the type of intelligence we cultivate.

Cultivating different forms of intelligence

Overall there are different types of intelligence, from direct cognitive intelligence to emotional, social or collective intelligence. These are related to either attention or awareness – this is due to the different underlying mental faculties that are used. Cognitive intelligence is more connected to working memory and conscious attentional control but usually comes with a reduction of relaxation, body awareness and wider perception. Emotional or social intelligence is more relational and strongly connected to body awareness, sensory perception and meta-awareness. Thus, whenever we overuse attention and underuse awareness we are cultivating one type of intelligence more than others.

SHIFTING WHAT KINDS OF INTELLIGENCE WE CULTIVATE

Mental faculties and types of intelligence

Mental Faculties	Cognitive Intelligence	Emotional Intelligence	Social Intelligence	Systems Intelligence	
Working Memory	Dark Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>More attentional based</p>  <p>More awareness based</p> </div>
Attentional Control	Dark Orange	Dark Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	
Emotional Regulation	Light Orange	Dark Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	
Relaxation	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	Dark Orange	
Interoception	Light Orange	Dark Orange	Dark Orange	Dark Orange	
Positive Outlook	Light Orange	Light Orange	Dark Orange	Dark Orange	
Empathy	Light Orange	Light Orange	Dark Orange	Dark Orange	
Perception	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	Dark Orange	
Meta cognitive awareness	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	Dark Orange	

Noticing the big picture

One thing that we have noticed quite strongly when working with leaders and executives is that they have been very much focused on effectiveness, getting stuff done, that they have very little perception of the bigger shifts in pattern that have been taking place. Many are unable to see the big picture, which in turn presents a high risk for organisations and leaders working entirely virtually. Numerous companies and studies have found challenges in relation to wider collaboration, creativity, and engagement in virtual work.

Attention and awareness as our gateways to reality

There is an additional point connected to this – which is quite profound. In every minute we are receiving millionfold more information through the senses than we can CONSCIOUSLY process. Our unconscious awareness processes this and filters this out. Thus, what we experience consciously – and which we can then direct our attention to and integrate into our being – is determined by what gets in through the filtering process of our unconscious mind. This window of attention has massively shifted in the past months. What we are experiencing and what we are immersing into is more virtual, more solitary and at the same more cognitive, and faster world. So, it is likely that we will be more connected on the cognitive level, but less embodied, less emotionally aware, and thus more separated by level of experience and empathy. Also, we will be likely to be more focused on effectiveness and outcomes than the HOW.



Cultivating awareness

It is possible to cultivate awareness and cultivate other forms of intelligence while working virtually. As individuals, we need to be MORE conscious of taking breaks, looking out the window, reflecting, moving, feeling our bodies. This behaviour emerges naturally in our working life – but can disappear in our virtual working patterns. All these activities cultivate a broader awareness – just like listening to music, painting, or engaging in most artistic endeavours. Furthermore, it is possible to strengthen awareness and

reflection as a group – taking time for emotional check-ins, scheduling retrospective sessions in meetings, noticing larger pattern shifts. In general, there is a danger that being curious, being open to uncertainty, not fixating on outcomes, and group creative processes will either suffer – or will need more emphasis to ensure good outcomes. Reflective time – time to disconnect, to feel, to sense will become even more important – both for individuals as well as for groups.

Grounded present moment awareness

The less we are aware – both of our bodies and our environment or others – the more our mind tends to jump. When we ground ourselves in our bodies – thus activating awareness – we can become more centred – aware and present. The awareness of our bodily states – known as interoception – is tremendously important to cultivate in this disembodied time – it helps us be present and not jump at every mental shift that we are experiencing.

Awareness is the basis for “Presence of mind”.

When someone is calm and collected and maintains an overview amid challenging situations, we speak of their presence of mind. This is not a mysterious accident – but can be developed when people’s awareness is cultivated and grounded. This encompasses body awareness – being aware of our body and our inner states – and environmental or panoramic awareness. Body awareness gives us the feeling of being centred – and environmental awareness is the feeling we have when we see the whole and the connections. Cultivating mental habits of awareness – feeling and seeing the whole – will be crucial to find the right path through the coming difficult periods. This requires repeated practice. Research continues to show that practice of mindfulness and other practices lead to profound shifts in both body and panoramic awareness. And it will be essential for cultivating of habits of awareness – and not getting trapped in overusing attention.

Sources:

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