

A Defense of the Distracted

How the worst office workers of the last century became the best ones of this one.

BY CHRIS WYATT · 5 MINUTE READ · COLLECTED EDITION 2026

I've been told I have a focus problem. In my defense, I have many focuses. For most of recorded history, this was a flaw. The Protestant work ethic, which Max Weber blamed for capitalism and which I blame for Mondays, treated sustained labor as evidence of moral seriousness. Frederick Winslow Taylor, the patron saint of stopwatches, spent the early 1900s convincing factory owners that a worker's attention could be measured in tenths of a second and that any deviation was, essentially, theft. We built schools around this idea, complete with bells modeled on factory whistles. We built offices around this idea. In 1980, the DSM-III formalized the deviation as a disorder and sorted millions of children into a column marked broken.

The diagnosis is real. I am not litigating that. I am litigating the column.

Here is what nobody mentions about the distractible: in studies of divergent thinking, adults with ADHD outperform the neurotypical control group (White and Shah, 2011). We were worse at the SAT and better at brainstorming, which was a bad trade for a century, because the SAT was a real test and brainstorming was something you did at an offsite while eating a muffin.

We were also more likely to start companies. A large study of Dutch university students found that those reporting diagnosed ADHD were more likely to be starting or running a venture (Lerner, Verheul, and Thurik, 2019). The standard interpretation is that we were too restless to keep our jobs. The other interpretation is that founding a company is mostly the act of generating ten ideas before breakfast and being too disorganized to be embarrassed by nine of them. Both interpretations are correct.

Then somebody invented the agent. And the people who used to brainstorm over muffins finally had a tool that matched how their brains actually work.

The standard story is that AI makes everyone more productive. The actual story is weirder. A 2023 BCG and Harvard study found consultants using GPT-4 produced work rated more than 40 percent higher in quality on tasks within the system's capabilities. Lower-performing consultants gained more. The study did not test ADHD. But the pattern suggests a possibility I recognize: a tool can change which parts of a mind get rewarded.

For a hundred years, the premium was on sustained concentration. The factory needed it. The spreadsheet needed it. We sorted people accordingly, paid them accordingly, and built open-plan offices that punished anyone who needed quiet: which, by some cosmic joke, was often the same people we had just hired for their concentration. None of this made sense. We did it anyway.

What we were really paying for was the bookshelf: the ability to sit in a chair for six hours assembling a single thought like an Ikea instruction manual, page one, page two, do not skip ahead. The distractible were bad at this. We were not bad at thinking. We were bad at the delivery format. The format is changing.

Watch a distractible person use an agent for the first time. There is a specific look on their face. It is the look of someone discovering their entire working life has been a translation problem. The thought does not have to be finished. It does not have to be good. You can hand a verbal shrug to a competent agent and get back, eight minutes later, a structured analysis of the verbal shrug, and somewhere in the volley a real idea emerges that neither of you had at the start. This is, incidentally, how creative people have always described their own thinking. The second participant simply used to be a human, and humans had other things to do.

There is something delicious about who built these tools. Silicon Valley has been, for thirty years, a quiet refuge for the cognitively unusual: founders, engineers, people who can hold seventeen browser tabs in their head but cannot find their phone while holding it. The agent was, in many ways, a prosthetic the builders built for themselves. The rest of us got it the way you inherit a coat from an older brother. Too big at first. Then suddenly the only thing that fits.

The bottleneck has moved. What is scarce now is not the ability to hold one idea for six hours. It is the ability to generate, in rapid succession, the kind of weird, ill-formed, sideways idea an agent can run with. The bottleneck used to live in the patient, plodding part of the office. Now it lives in the part that fidgets.

A word about hyperfocus, which is the cousin nobody mentions at the family reunion. The distractible brain cannot focus, except when it can, in which case it cannot stop. Researchers have a term for this (Hupfeld et al., 2019) and parents have a different term, which is we have been calling him for dinner for forty minutes. Hyperfocus is not the absence of ADHD. It is ADHD pointed at something interesting. My suspicion is that an agent lowers the activation cost of enough tasks to make something

interesting appear sooner. For some of us, that may mean more time absorbed in the work and less time in the soft static between tasks. That is a hypothesis, not a result the hyperfocus research has established.

The Beatitudes promised the meek would inherit the earth. They have so far declined to collect. The distractible, however, are about to inherit the work: which is, financially speaking, the better inheritance.

I want to be careful here. ADHD is, most days, an inconvenience. I have lost objects inside containers I was holding. I have started this essay four times. People who call it a superpower have generally not tried to file taxes with it, or sit through a parent-teacher conference, or remember a friend's birthday two years running. The condition is not a gift. What I am saying is narrower: a particular kind of mind, long penalized by the structure of knowledge work, happens to fit unusually well with a tool that just arrived. That is not destiny. It is luck. But it is the kind of luck that reorganizes industries.

The disciplined will be fine. They are always fine. They will adapt, the way they adapted to email and to the calculator, and in twenty years they will write books about how they invented this. Some of the books will be good. A few will even be true.

But somewhere right now there is a kid who cannot sit through algebra, who has in the last six minutes opened nine tabs and started four agents and lost track of what he was originally doing. Twenty years ago we would have medicated him. Ten years ago we would have hired him and slowly suffocated him under fluorescent lighting and team-building exercises. Today he is, without quite realizing it, operating at the exact frequency the new tools were built for.

He doesn't need to find the closing line. The tools are already writing the next chapter for him.

Sources. White and Shah (2011), Personality and Individual Differences, on divergent thinking in adults with ADHD. Lerner, Verheul, and Thurik (2019), "Entrepreneurship and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder: a large-scale study involving the clinical condition of ADHD," Small Business Economics, on reported ADHD diagnosis and venture initiation among Dutch university students. Dell'Acqua et al. (2023), Harvard Business School working paper with BCG, the GPT-4 productivity experiment with 758 consultants. Hupfeld et al. (2019), on hyperfocus in adult ADHD.