

Defragmentation: Attention by Design

SYSTEM . SELF . TEAM

A three-part series by
Performance Frontiers





01 SYSTEM

The True Cost of the Attention Economy

In 1991, the World Wide Web became publicly available. In the decades since, the accelerating pace of digital progress has transformed how we live, work and relate. Now, in 2026, we're checking our email before we check on our kids, scrolling feeds before breakfast and feeling behind before the workday has even started.

Many see this fragmentation as a character flaw. The responsibility is levelled squarely on the individual: if only you had better self-control. But this is a simplistic view.

Humans are shaped by our experiences. In the last three decades, those experiences have included the growth of systems engineered to capture, commodify and extract our attention.

Distractibility is less a character flaw and more a natural, predictable outcome of the conditions around us. A systemic challenge that requires systemic awareness to address.

The attention economy

If you've ever been on a cruise, you'll know that some onboard buffets never close. The scent of the seafaring smorgasbord follows you from deck-to-deck, always tempting one more bite.

The modern information landscape works in a similar way, except this buffet has been designed to learn what keeps each of us coming back.

Digital platforms offer an unlimited stream of information at minimal cost or effort. Most isn't designed to nourish us. It's designed to prolong our engagement, or provoke a response. Novelty attracts us, social feedback meets our need for connection and belonging, and emotionally charged material ensnares us in a threat scanning cycle. Platforms amplify these signals because every click, scroll and minute of engagement can be monetised.

You aren't weak for being drawn in. You are a human being with an ancient nervous system adapted to notice change, opportunity and danger, living within an economic system that profits from keeping that system activated.

Your attention may be a hot commodity. But the platforms aren't the ones paying for it. The cost appears in your life: in exhaustion, fractured focus and diminished capacity. Behavioural economists describe this as an attentional externality: a cost generated by one party but borne by another (Loewenstein & Wojtowicz, 2023).



The most important thing about the attention economy is that it's not just trying to capture your attention. **It's trying to shape your choices, your desires: who you are.**



James Williams, Stand Out of Our Light (2018)

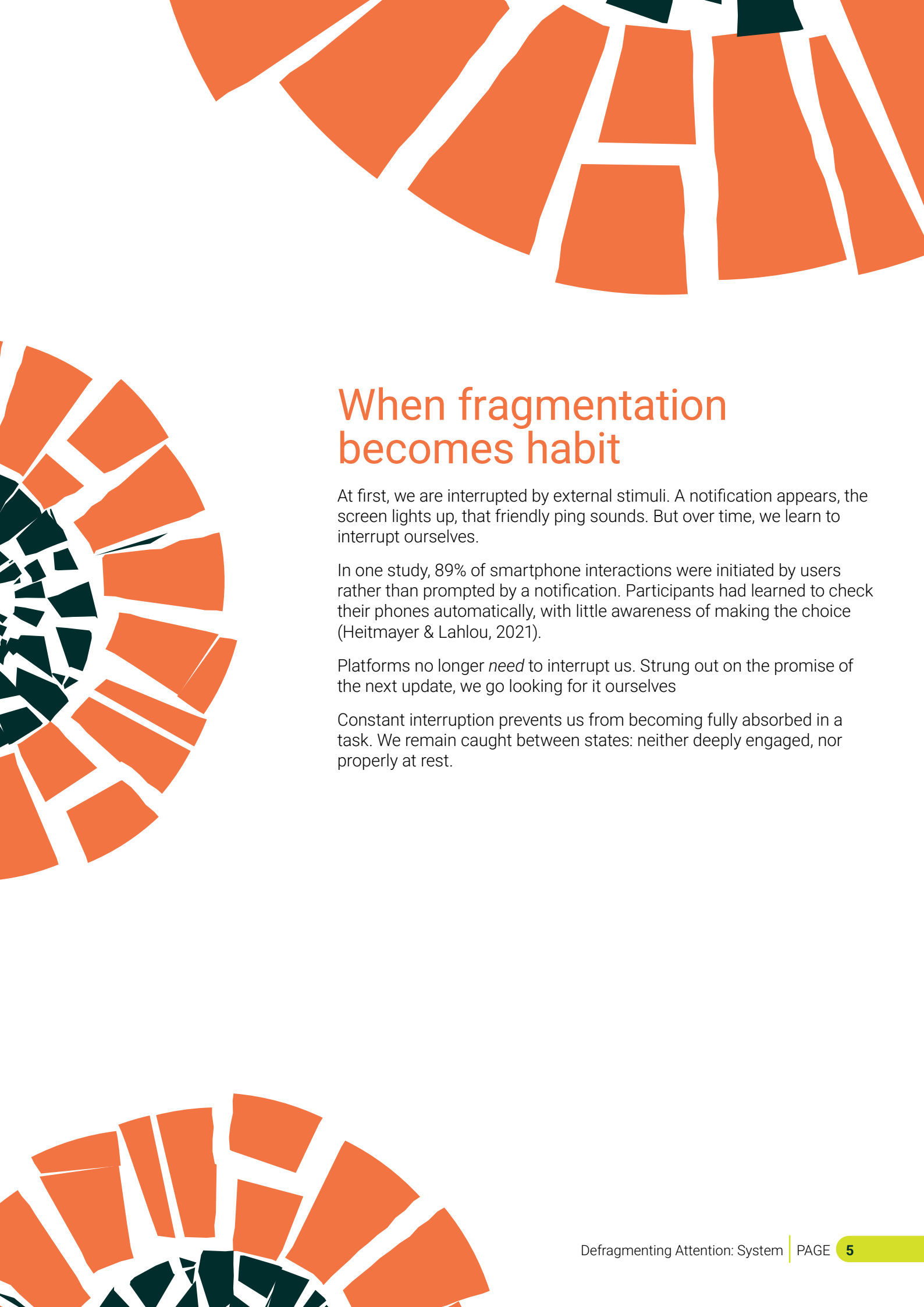
How attention works

Attention is more than concentration. It is the process through which some parts of our experience enter our awareness, while others recede.

At any moment, more is happening around us and within us than we can consciously process. Attention selects what gets through. It influences what we notice, what we think and feel about, and what we remember.

Some of that selection is deliberate. **Goal-directed attention** involves consciously directing mental effort towards information or actions that help us achieve a particular goal, like working through a difficult problem.

But our attention can also be captured by something new, rewarding or potentially threatening. **Stimulus-driven attention** is a rapid, involuntary response that evolved to help us detect important changes in our environment before we had time to consciously assess them (Theeuwes, 2025). Because it's automatic, it can override the slower, more challenging process of staying focused on a goal. Digital platforms are particularly effective at triggering this response, hooking us before our goal-directed attention has time to kick in (Levy, 2026).



When fragmentation becomes habit

At first, we are interrupted by external stimuli. A notification appears, the screen lights up, that friendly ping sounds. But over time, we learn to interrupt ourselves.

In one study, 89% of smartphone interactions were initiated by users rather than prompted by a notification. Participants had learned to check their phones automatically, with little awareness of making the choice (Heitmayer & Lahlou, 2021).

Platforms no longer *need* to interrupt us. Strung out on the promise of the next update, we go looking for it ourselves

Constant interruption prevents us from becoming fully absorbed in a task. We remain caught between states: neither deeply engaged, nor properly at rest.

The systemic cost

The consequences of fragmented attention show up in how people make decisions, relate to one another and work together. Looking at where these patterns appear can help reveal what is driving them and where change is needed.

Recognising Systemic Fragmentation



At an individual level:

- Checking your phone or inbox without consciously deciding to
- Moving between several tasks but finishing very few
- Losing your train of thought midway through a conversation
- Responding quickly or defensively before fully understanding what is being asked
- Feeling restless when there is nothing immediate to react to
- Ending the day exhausted but struggling to say what you actually completed
- A sense that you're not in the driver's seat of your own life



At a team level:

- Calendars full of meetings but little meaningful progress
- Meetings ending without a clear decision, owner or next step
- The same issues returning week after week without resolution
- Messages being answered quickly while important work continues to stall
- People interrupting, talking past one another or retreating into side conversations
- Small problems escalating into urgent ones
- Plenty of activity and output, but little evidence of deeper thinking



At an organisational level:

- Strategy constantly being overhauled and revolutionised
- Cross-functional projects stalling at every handoff
- Initiatives launched with energy, but losing steam when the next urgent priority arrives
- Decisions climbing further up the chain than they need to
- Engagement or culture surveys showing vastly different metrics across departments, or rising exhaustion year upon year, with little change.

Fragmentation is more than a productivity problem.

Attention determines what we think and feel about, and what we hold onto. It is the difference between inhabiting the moment and being mentally scattered across a dozen other places. In that sense, it defines our experience of life.

When we're overwhelmed, we become more reliant on cognitive shortcuts and less likely to scrutinise. This affects our ability to distinguish truth, influencing how we understand the world, what we believe and the choices we make (Kwek et al., 2023).

Over time, what repeatedly receives our attention helps shape who we become.

Reclaiming attention begins with seeing the system clearly. Only then can we decide what should change, in ourselves and in the environments we create for others.

References

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More on Defragmentation: Attention by Design

01. SYSTEM A systemic lens on how we fragment and the stakes. ([here](#))

02. SELF Where you're surrendering attention and how to start taking it back.

03. TEAM The conditions that fragment team attention and how to dismantle them.



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