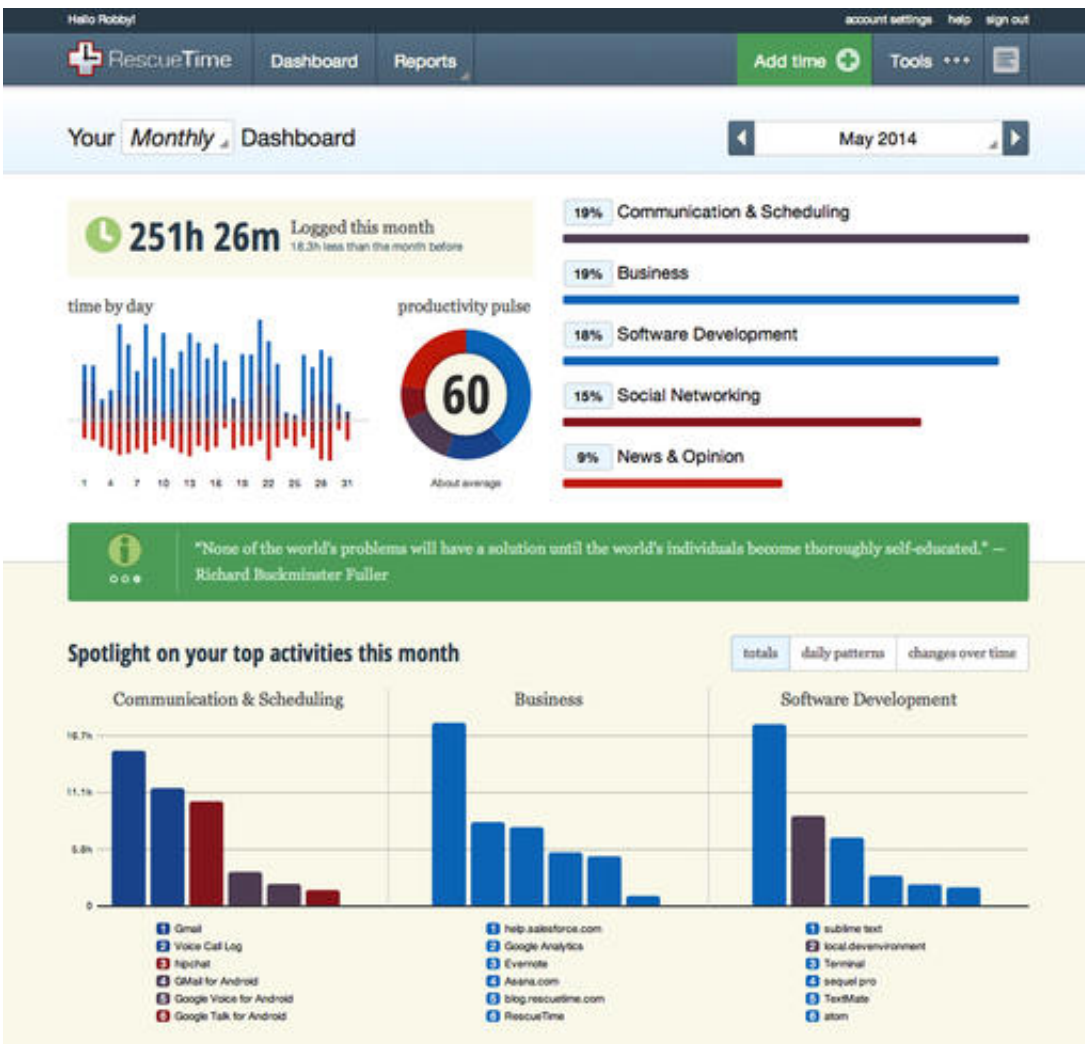# Control yourself: 6 apps to help fight digital distraction

May 31 2016, by Melissa Rayworth

This undated photo shows a screen shot of the application RescueTime, which allows people to track their time spent on various websites to find out just how many minutes each day they're spending on non-essential tasks and casual web surfing. Sometimes the solution to distracting technology is more technology. (RescueTime via AP)

When busy people sit down at night to pay bills, answer emails or RSVP for their kids' school events, they don't plan to procrastinate. But somehow a quick visit to Facebook becomes 20 minutes of mindless scrolling, and a momentary search for a needed item morphs into a half-hour of virtual shopping.

"We have more distractions than ever and that makes getting things done harder," says Donna Smallin, author of "Get Organized: Secrets of Professional Organizers" (Flying the Koop Press, 2014). "When I have to get work done, I have to log out of Facebook. ... Same goes for e-mail."

The strangest thing about procrastination is that the only thing standing between you and the joy of completing your work is ... you. Yet willpower is rarely enough to keep us from wasting time, says Justin Couchman, assistant professor of psychology at Albright College in Reading, Pa.

"People like to be distracted," he says. "They like to do what makes their mind feel rewarded immediately."

It doesn't help that today our work and play happen on the same devices.

What's the solution?

"Setting a timer to work for 30 minutes and then taking a five-minute break" can be effective, says Smallin. "Or giving yourself a treat or reward when you complete a project."

But technology offers its own solutions: There are now dozens of apps designed to help us stop wasting time online. They help "set up a

situation in advance that makes it just a little bit harder or a little less convenient" to stray off task, says Couchman.

Here are six:

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WHEN YOU CAN'T STOP SURFING

You should be doing something productive around the house but instead you're wandering the social media landscape. If you can't fight the urge to keep switching to other screens, SimpleBlocker is a free Google Chrome extension designed to block access to websites of your choice. You set a timer, blocking sites for as long as you choose. You can always shut the timer off earlier, or alternatively make it harder to turn off by adding a password.

Other Google Chrome extensions for selective blocking include StayFocusd, which lets you set a time limit for visiting sites that distract you.

Beyond Chrome, there's an app called Forest that works with Apple, Android, Windows Phone, Chrome and Firefox. It merges digital gaming with a dose of environmental guilt: If you stay off your blacklisted sites, you earn virtual coins that eventually are donated as real money toward planting an actual tree. But give in to distraction and you won't earn those coins, meaning the real tree doesn't get planted because you wasted a half-hour on Facebook.

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WHEN YOU WANT THE TRUTH

RescueTime (for Apple, Android and Windows) tracks the sites you visit and how many minutes you spend there. The idea is that keeping an honest accounting of how many minutes you've spent on time-sucking places online can help you pare down that wasted time. It can be eye-opening to realize you spent 90 minutes on social media during your work day when you were sure you'd wasted less than 30.

Parents can use RescueTime to monitor children's web browsing, making sure that kids who are doing homework on a computer or tablet aren't actually elsewhere on the web.

You also can use RescueTime as a site blocker.

For privacy, you can delete your data at any time, and RescueTime pledges not to sell its customers' online behavior data or use it in any other way.

Many phones actually have built-in time trackers that list the websites where you've spent the most minutes.

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WHEN YOU MUST WRITE TODAY

In the digital world, everyone writes: Maybe it's an e-mail or report, a blog entry or a business plan. Or maybe it's the novel you've promised yourself you'll start. To jumpstart any writing project, consider Flowstate, an app that offers little more than a blank screen but will begin deleting everything you've written if you stop writing for more than a few seconds. Again, you can set a timer.

The app's creators have said that your writing "flow" really kicks in after about 15 minutes.

WHEN YOU WANT A STEADY REMINDER

Momentum, another free Google Chrome plug-in, is a landing page that appears each time you open a new tab. At the start of your day, you type in a goal for the day. Each time you open a tab (perhaps to go shopping or web surfing), you see that goal in a large font in the center of your screen.

It's a nice prod to make sure that whatever you're doing is in the service of that goal. And if you achieve that first goal of the day, you can replace it with another.

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