



Withdrawing the Senses: Pratyāhāra, Technostress, and a Framework for Protecting Attention at Work

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ABSTRACT: The modern workplace is plagued by distractions. Notification, messages, and the expectation of an instant replay distract employees and by the end of the day, they are less productive and more exhausted. There's a name for the strain that digital tools create: technostress, and there's an increasing awareness of the costs, but the remedies are usually one of two types: individual (mindfulness or a digital detox), for which evidence is mixed; and organisational (right to disconnect), for which the reviews suggest it does little on its own. This paper seeks assistance in an unlikely source. That is exactly what the yogic tradition calls pratyāhāra, the disciplined withdrawal of the senses from their objects, which was worked out long before the smartphone. The paper suggests a framework of attention protection, at three levels: individual, team and organisation, by reading pratyāhāra in the light of the modern psychology of attention, namely Attention Restoration Theory and the Job Demands–Resources model. Its main thesis is that the inner practice must be supported by the outer levels. The structure is provided for testing and the boundaries are clearly defined.

KEYWORDS: Indian Knowledge Systems; pratyāhāra; technostress; attention; digital overload; Job Demands–Resources model; Attention Restoration Theory; employee wellbeing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Much of the work in today's offices takes place in a state of almost constant interruption. One message comes in, then another, then an email pops up, a calendar notification clashes with a chat notification, and there's the silent pressure to respond, and respond quickly. Throughout the day, there are lots of little attention switching moments and by the end of the day, many employees are feeling like they were busy, but not sure what they accomplished. It's not about manners or discipline. It's now one of the accepted strains of digital working life and it has a name.

It is known as technostress: the stress resulting from the use of information and communication technologies at work (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). Over time, the construct has proven to be resilient and technology-related stressors (overload, invasion, complexity) have been found to be associated with reduced job satisfaction and increased strain in a multitude of contexts (Mansuroğlu & Smith, 2025). This is hardly surprising in a country like India, where the service economy is based on exactly the kind of work that is always-on, screen-bound, and is the source of the problem (Kumar, 2024). The costs are not insignificant: the human impact of poor employee mental health is undeniable given the recent focus on overwork (Consultancy.in, 2024), and the cost of poor employee mental health is already significant for Indian employers (Deloitte, 2022).

What is remarkable is the lack of uniformity in the proposed remedies. Then there are individual solutions—mindfulness training, digital fasts, apps that block apps—that, when examined, have mixed evidence. On the other side, there are structural changes, most notably the 'right to disconnect', which, as per the reviews, does not seem to do much if the norms remain the same (Barber et al., 2026). Each camp has hold of part of the truth, and neither, on its own, seems to work. It is this impasse that this paper attempts to exploit.

The resource I wish to tap is an old one. The yogic tradition long ago identified the struggle of the mind drawn away from itself by its senses, and suggested a practice for it: pratyāhāra, the conscious withdrawal of the senses from their objects. It is the word that repays attention, for it is composed from prati and āhāra, which literally translates to 'withdrawal from intake' – the intake of the senses is food. When read alongside the modern psychology of attention, pratyāhā is an unusually precise description of the contemporary problem. The following compares and contrasts the two traditions and develops a model for safeguarding attention at work. As with the

papers that came before it, this is a conceptual exercise (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020): it is a linkage of ideas and claims to be tested, not findings secured. It starts with the form of the problem.

II. THE DISTRACTED WORKPLACE

The daily reality of knowledge work is one of interleaved rather than sequential tasks. A report is written in the gaps between messages, a meeting attended with one eye on a chat window, a train of thought broken and restarted many times an hour. Gloria Mark's (2023) research on attention at work documents how short and how fragmented these episodes have become, and how long it takes to resettle into focused work after each interruption — a day of effort, in the familiar experience, that leaves surprisingly little to show.

Underneath the interruptions runs a subtler pressure. Barber and Santuzzi (2015) named it telepressure: the felt urge to respond to messages quickly, and the preoccupation with doing so, which keeps the mind tethered to work even when the body has left it. Telepressure matters here for two reasons. It fragments attention during the day, and — as the sleep literature makes clear — it blocks the psychological detachment on which recovery depends, so that the working day never quite ends. Technostress, in other words, is not only about the volume of information but about the norms of responsiveness that surround it.

Not everything in this could be interpreted as a personal failing. In many ways, much of the distraction is engineered: notifications are designed to interrupt, platforms compete for attention, and workplace norms quietly reward the employee who responds within minutes. That's why the issue is one that should be on the management agenda, rather than just a self-help book. If attention is being eroded partly by design and partly by norm, then it can be protected partly by design and partly by norm — a thought to which the framework will return.

All this is accentuated by the Indian setting. Much of the white-collar economy in this country is based on the idea of serving clients in other time zones, making the day job last well into the night, and the after-hours availability from a once-in-a-while annoyance to a standard part of the job. Throw in the fact that just about everyone uses messaging for work, and the line between being at work and not at work becomes very blurred. It is not surprising that India is a common setting for technostress research and an emerging source of it (Kumar, 2024); the conditions that generate the strain are perhaps more focused here than in the western settings in which the construct was first identified.

III. WHAT TECHNOLOGY DOES TO ATTENTION

To build on the problem one needs a theory of why constant interruption costs so much, and here the most useful account is the most specific one. Attention Restoration Theory holds that the capacity for directed, effortful attention is finite: sustained focus, and — one may reasonably add — sustained interruption, produce a state Kaplan (1995) calls directed-attention fatigue, in which the mind grows irritable and hard to steer and needs a period of restoration before it recovers its edge. I lean on this theory rather than on the more general resource models because it speaks directly to attention: it names what is depleted and how it comes back, where the broader frameworks describe the balance sheet without itemising this particular account. A competing candidate is worth naming and setting aside. The self-control-strength, or 'ego-depletion', tradition would frame the same phenomenon as the draining of a general regulatory reserve; but its empirical foundations have been seriously shaken by large-scale replication efforts, and it would be imprudent to rest an attention-centred argument on a construct whose very existence is now contested. Attention Restoration Theory, whatever its own limits, keeps the argument on the narrower and better-evidenced ground of attention itself.

That said, the broader frameworks earn their place around it. The Job Demands–Resources model lets us treat the technology itself as a job demand — a 'techno-demand' that draws down energy much as any other demand does (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008) — while Conservation of Resources theory frames attention and self-control as reserves that overload depletes and rest restores (Hobfoll, 1989). The relationship among the three is one of nesting rather than rivalry: Attention Restoration Theory supplies the mechanism, the Job Demands–Resources model supplies the framing of technology as a demand, and Conservation of Resources supplies the language of depletion and recovery. It is the attention theory, though, that does the specific work.

One further strand of evidence speaks to the mechanism directly. On average, the notion of multitasking is incorrect, and what is perceived as multitasking is actually rapid multitasking, with each switch costing a bit of time and accuracy, adding up over the course of a day of interruptions (Mark, 2023). This places the fault not only in the amount of information but rather in the very nature of its fragmentation — that which *pratyāhāra* is supposed to overcome by fixing the senses on one object at a time. It's a helpful reminder that the issue is not just quantitative, but also qualitative: not just too much to attend to, but that attention is never given the chance to settle.

What is the level of evidence? Mixed, and it's worth a sceptical read. The most frequently cited one is a study by Ward et al. (2017) showing that having one's own phone, face down and powered off, decreases the amount of cognitive resources available. It's a neat experiment, but subsequent repetitions have yielded mixed

results, and the effect is now considered more a matter of debate than fact, and any argument based on it would be on shaky ground. The telepressure research is more robust, with the felt urge to respond being associated with poorer recovery and detachment in a number of studies (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). The technostress reviews provide reliable relationships between technostress and strain, but they also acknowledge two points that a critical reader should bear in mind: The majority of the primary studies are cross-sectional and self-reported, and common-method bias and reverse causation are possible; and the impact of technostress is not consistent across samples and context (Mansuroğlu & Smith, 2025; Kumar, 2024). The bottom line of the fair is that the literature has demonstrated that there is a correlation between constant connectivity and strain and distraction, but not yet, with the designs that would prove it, that there is a correlation between constant connectivity and the level of strain and distraction that the rhetoric around it suggests. The framework is provided in that light: as a response to an association which is well evidenced but has a causal texture still to be worked out.

IV. Pratyāhāra: THE DISCIPLINE OF WITHDRAWING THE SENSES

The yogic tradition knew a long time ago what this difficulty was and what the practice was. The fifth limb in Patañjali's eight-limbed scheme is the deliberate withdrawal of the senses from their objects, and is the gateway between the outward practices and the inward ones of concentration (dhāraṇā) and meditation (dhyāna) (Yoga Sūtras 2.54-55). The positioning is significant: sense-withdrawal is not an end in itself, but the hinge upon which sustained attention turns. Without it, the tradition says, the deeper states of focus cannot be achieved, because the mind continues to seep out through the senses.

The same thought is repeated in various pictures throughout the classical sources. The disciplined person can withdraw the senses from their objects as easily, and as completely, as can the tortoise that draws in its limbs at will (2.58). The Kāṭha Upaniṣad presents the older image of the chariot, the senses as horses, the mind as the reins, and the intellect as the charioteer, but in which the attention is either controlled or uncontrolled, and there is little in between. And, as is characteristic of Ayurveda, the question is not only one of spiritual achievement, but of health: in the ethic of sadvṛtta, right conduct involves the regulation of the senses, and the concept of asātmendriyārtha saṃyoga refers to the unwholesome contact of the senses with their objects as a real cause of disease (Charaka Saṃhitā).

The similarity to the modern account is close, but it should be said with caution, since the two traditions are doing different kinds of work. Attention Restoration Theory is an empirical statement concerning a cognitive resource: directed attention is limited, it is exhaustible, and it is replenishable. Pratyāhāra is not like that at all, it is a normative practice in a soteriology, a step in a path whose ultimate goal is not focus at work, but liberation. To say that the two are 'the same' would be to smooth over the difference and overstate. What is more modestly and more defensibly said is that they converge on a similar mechanism from opposite epistemological directions: both hold that attention is pulled outwards through the senses, that this pulling outwards has a cost, and that the capacity to pull it back inwards can be trained. Attention Restoration Theory arrives at this by measurement; the yogic tradition by centuries of introspective practice. The value of this juxtaposition is exactly the difference: the tradition offers a well-formed practice and a language of inner life that the psychological literature does not have, and the psychological literature offers the evidentiary discipline that the tradition does not. The comparison is apt not as two truths in two languages, but as complementary lenses on a related process.

It is important to be wary of a possible misreading, as the tradition is cautious about a point that could be overlooked. Pratyāhāra is not the forcible shutting-off of the senses, nor a retreat into numbness. The senses continue to receive their impressions; the difference is that the mind no longer is dragged along by them and attention is turned inward instead of being turned off. The difference is important in the workplace, as it is a way to differentiate the practice from the less sophisticated notion of simply banning devices or enforcing silence. What pratyāhāra refers to is more of a well-trained relationship with sensory input, the ability to choose what to attend to, rather than abstaining from sensory input. It's more challenging than a digital fast, and, in theory, a more sustainable one.

But there must be a clear statement of the limitation, and this is a big one. There is virtually no empirical literature on Pratyāhāra itself. The evidence under the headings of 'mindfulness' and 'meditation' overlaps with pratyāhāra but is not the same as it — mindfulness is usually an open and receptive monitoring of experience, pratyāhāra is more of a narrowing. The efficacy question has been asked of a neighbouring construct, to a large extent. That's a serious lack in any argument the tradition may have, and also, for a researcher, an unusually clear starting point.

V. A FRAMEWORK AT THREE LEVELS

The trouble with most existing remedies is that each picks a single level of the problem and stops there. Mindfulness and digital-detox programmes act on the individual, and their results are mixed, with the digital-detox evidence in particular proving inconsistent (Mirbabaie et al., 2022; Anandpara et al., 2024). Disconnection policies act on the organisation, and reviews find they achieve little unless the underlying norms of availability

also shift (Barber et al., 2026). Neither the purely individual nor the purely structural remedy has worked well on its own, and the reason, I think, is that attention at work is not governed at a single level. Figure 1 sets out the mechanism the framework has to interrupt; Figure 2 sets out where it proposes to intervene.

Technology as a job demand (JD-R); attention as a depletable resource (COR; Attention Restoration Theory)

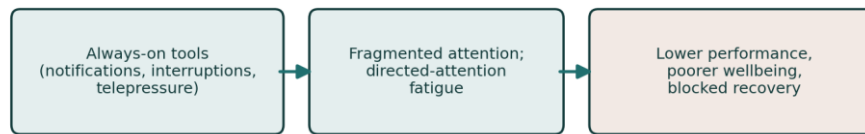


Fig. 1 - How digital overload erodes attention. Always-on tools fragment attention and produce directed-attention fatigue, which shows up as lower performance, poorer wellbeing, and blocked recovery.

The framework treats attention as something protected — or eroded — at three nested levels. At the centre is the individual, and it is here that pratyāhāra belongs: as a trainable practice of drawing the senses back from their objects, expressed in ordinary modern terms as single-tasking, scheduled withdrawal from devices, blocks of protected focus, and the simple discipline of switching off the notifications that pull the attention outward. Around the individual sits the team, whose shared norms of availability decide whether such practice is even possible; an employee cannot withdraw her senses from the screen if her colleagues expect an answer within five minutes. And around the team sits the organisation, whose policies and default settings — a right to disconnect, quieter systems, protected focus time — set the conditions under which the inner practice can survive contact with the working day.

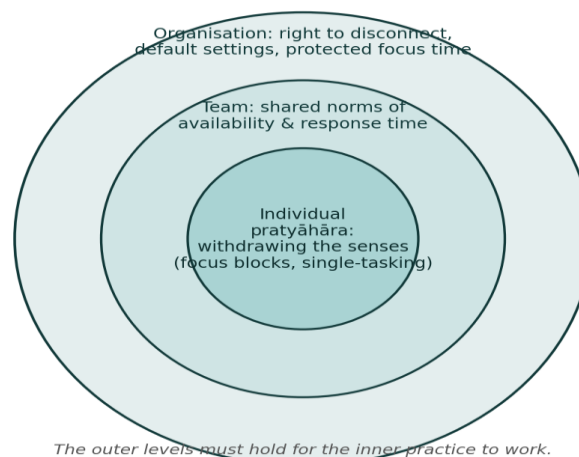


Fig. 2 - A framework at three levels. Pratyāhāra sits at the individual centre, but it is nested within team norms and organisational policy; the outer levels must hold for the inner practice to work.

What sets this framework apart from a typical mindfulness programme is the nesting itself, the levels are not a menu but a dependency, the outer must hold for the inner to work. It is not only ineffective to ask employees to practise pratyāhāra while the organisation continues to reward instant replies, it is also unfair — it gives employees responsibility for a problem that they cannot control. On this account, structure takes precedence, not as an afterthought to the individual practice, but as its precondition. That is done on purpose, and it is supposed to create the familiar resistance to such initiatives into the design, not the critics.

The framework can be tested level-wise and the interactions are interesting. One would like to know if, at the individual level, pratyāhāra-style practices really do reduce technostress and enhance focus; if team norms moderate that effect, which is the more telling test since the framework suggests that it will not work where team norms are hostile; and if organisational policy truly does change team norms or just announces a right no one feels free to exercise. A second study should be conducted that compares the sensory-withdrawal framing with a standard mindfulness or digital-detox programme, to determine if the more precise framing is worth it or if it is just a new name for the same thing. None of this involves any acceptance of the metaphysics of yoga, only that the disciplined withdrawal of attention, with the proper conditions, helps — which is a statement about behaviour,

open to ordinary test, and in line with Chakraborty's (1991) plea for management that draws from India's own resources.

VI. IMPLICATIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The framework in practice is a call to action at every level, not at one: individual practices of focused attention, team charters that agree when people may be unreachable, and organisational defaults that make the quieter option the easy one. None of this is costly, and in an Indian workforce the concept behind it, that the senses can be and should be controlled, is not new. The unique guidance is just that no one level should be relied on alone.

There are two objections that need a direct response, and a third that needs to be acknowledged. The first is the charge of blaming the individual for a structural issue, which the framework attempts to defuse by design: the organisational level is not the afterthought, but still, a well-drafted policy can become a box to be ticked, while the actual norms remain untouched. The second objection is more pointed: does pratyāhā amount to anything more than mindfulness or digital detox in Sanskrit garb? Yes, there are overlaps in the practices and it's not like I'm denying that. What pratyāhāra does add is a more specific idea, the idea of deliberate sensory withdrawal, as opposed to open monitoring, and a place in a larger system of attention training; whether this precision is of any measurable benefit is, again, a matter for research and not assertion.

The third is intellectual honesty with regard to the broader story. The well-known and widely read Carr (2010) is among those who argue that constant connectivity is rewiring our brains in ways the evidence does not clearly support. The framework does not require such a robust story and would be better served by a more modest and better-supported claim: that persistent interruption is costly for attention and recovery, as the technostress and telepressure literatures do support.

The contribution can be formulated more precisely for theory than by just describing the framework. The literature about attention at work is effectively divided into two parts that do not communicate with each other. One finds the cure in the individual: mindfulness, self-regulation, digital detox—and it is assumed that attention is a personal skill to be strengthened. The other finds it in the organisation (disconnection rights, notification defaults) and takes it for granted that attention is a structural condition to be legislated. Both halves are half-good and, individually, half-true. What this framework does change is the assumed locus of control; it considers the protection of attention to be an interdependent process across levels, where individual practice is not simply supported but gated by structural provision. The claim is that attention at work cannot be repaired one level at a time – that individual sensory discipline and organisational design are not substitutes, but complements and the effect of one is conditional on the other. The reframing is important for two reasons. It transforms a question of personal skill into a question of organisational responsibility; and it produces specific, falsifiable interaction predictions that are unattainable at either a single level. It is at this individual level of that structure that an Indian Knowledge Systems practice, pratyāhāra, can be located and that is what makes it possible for the tradition to offer something the management literature has not yet provided: a developed account of the inner discipline of which the outer conditions are the guardians.

VII. BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

A scheme of this sort should be clear about its limitations and the truth is that it doesn't go as far as one would like. It assumes a certain independence of one's attention, which is developed through disciplined withdrawal of the senses, and which many occupations do not allow, in the center of the move. That assumption is the limit, and it's good to follow.

One of the most obvious boundaries is the group of high-reliability and safety critical jobs. In the emergency room, the air-traffic control room, or the control room of a chemical plant, the ability to maintain an outward gaze and to respond almost immediately is not a disease to be treated, but a skill to be cultivated, and a right to disconnect is clearly and appropriately limited. In this context the question is almost the opposite of the one posed by this paper: not how to divert attention from an over-stimulating environment, but how to maintain attention without collapse, and the model should bow to the extensive human-factors literature that already covers this.

A second and larger boundary is drawn by autonomy itself. The individual level of the framework assumes that an employee is able to select at least at times what to attend to and when to be unreachable. In large workplaces, there is no such freedom: call-centre workers, gig and platform workers, retail and other customer-facing workers, and many shop-floor and shift workers have their attention controlled by others and their attention is a resource that is directed by the employer. For these workers the framework is not so much a failure as a collapse to the outer ring: if attention is to be protected at all, it can only be structurally and regulatory, for there is no inner practice in which to operate. It's not a minor degree. It suggests that it is most relevant for the relatively autonomous knowledge workers already the better protected, and least for those with the least control – which the paper ought to acknowledge and not hide.

These boundaries do not cancel out the framework, but they do constrain it, and in so doing, they indicate what might be its key moderating variable: autonomy over attention itself. The framework needs to be most strongly applied where autonomy is high, less strongly applied where autonomy is challenged, and inverted where responsiveness is the very product of the work. That's a testable statement in itself, and maybe the most important one that the framework produces.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The distraction that envelops the modern office is new in its technology, but old in its structure: the senses reaching out, faster and more insistently than the mind can control them. The yogic tradition had already encountered that structure long ago, in the practice of pratyāhāra, withdrawal of the senses, and the modern science of attention, by another path, has arrived at a similar image of a finite capacity that is drained by fragmentation and replenished by withdrawal. This paper has sought to bring the two together, and to suggest that the bringing together is only of service if it is done at more than one level; that the oldest counsel, "Withdraw the senses," is useful in the modern world only if organisations create the conditions which enable people to do it. It's not any particular technique, it's that, and that's the only thing that matters, the only thing the whole idea rests on.

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