



The science of distraction

A research-backed guide to attention at work – and designing presentations people actually stay with



+
GOLDFISH
MYTHS
DEBUNKED



I struggle to get my daughter's full attention

There. I said it. For me, it's among the hardest parts of being a modern dad.

And if you ask any presenter what the hardest part of their job is, you'll most likely hear the same thing: keeping the attention of the room.

In today's world, attention is one of the rarest and most valuable currencies we have. It's not that people don't care—it's that they're overwhelmed. Notifications. Tabs. Emails. Slack. TikTok. And let's not forget the dopamine hit that's always just a scroll away. The challenge for today's presenters isn't just delivering information. It's creating moments. The kind that invite curiosity, increase participation, and leave a lasting impression on audiences. In short? It's about having more impact.

At AhaSlides, this is what drives us. We believe that engagement isn't a nice-to-have but the foundation of effective communication, of meaningful learning, of high performing teams. And it's under threat from what we call the "attention gremlin", or the invisible force pulling people out of the room and into distraction.

Our daily work is to push back. And this whitepaper is part myth-busting, part brain science, part battle plan. It explains what's happening to attention, why it matters to you as a presenter, and how you can fight back—with clarity, structure, interactivity, and a splash of fun.

Whether you're an L&D trainer, event organiser, HR professional or everyday team lead, I hope this helps you create more of those "aha" moments we live for—the ones that make the room light up, help you hold the room's attention, and make sure your message gets remembered.

Here's to fewer sleepy slides, and more aha moments.

Dave Bui
Founder & CEO, AhaSlides





Whether you're an L&D professional, meeting organiser, keynote speaker or frequent presenter, I hope this can help you defeat distraction and create more **aha moments.**



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Meet Herbert A. Simon

He came up with one of the ideas that stand behind our business, and he did it more than fifty years ago.

He developed the term ‘attention economy’ when he wrote about how an increasingly information rich world is making greater and greater demands on our attention spans.

“How can we arrange to conserve and effectively allocate scarce attention,” he asked, and went on to add: “Progress lies in the direction of extracting and exploiting the patterns of the world so that far less information needs to be read, written or stored”^[1].

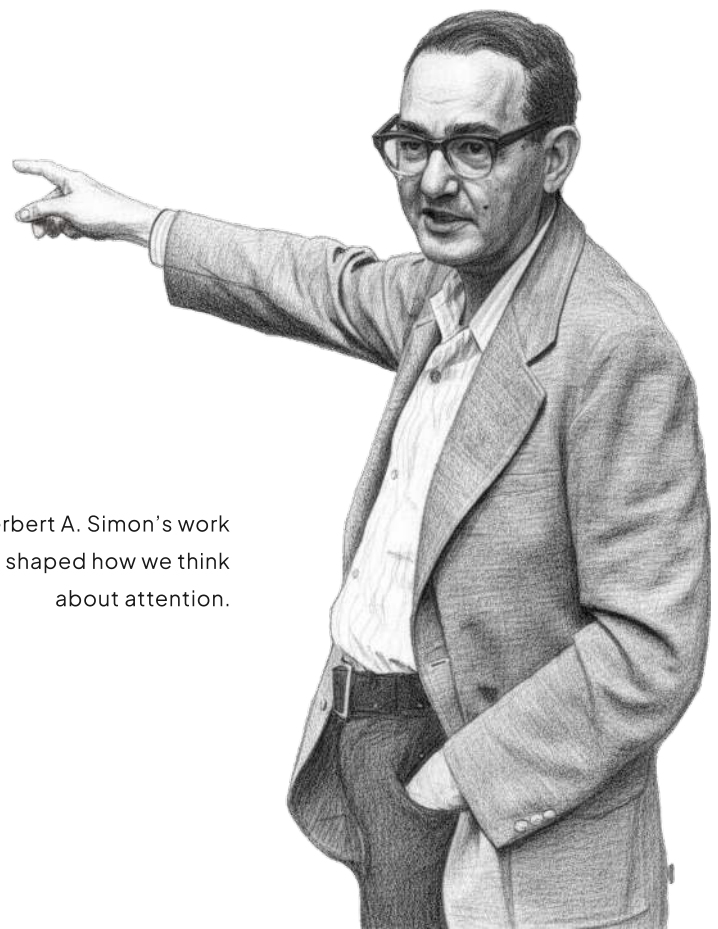
And that’s where you come in.

The chances are that you’re reading this because you’re interested in getting (and then keeping!) people’s attention because you want to tell them something important. Maybe you’re a learning and development professional, a lecturer or an event organiser. Or perhaps you’re a guest speaker and you’re looking to engage your audience, whether they’re students, professionals or potential clients.

Here's some good news: it's easy to get and hold people's attention.

All of the ways of doing this are underpinned by solid, neurological research and all that you need is access to the right information and the tools that take advantage of it. We'll talk you through some of that shortly.

But there's also some bad news mixed in there as well. Most of the widely available information about attention spans is wrong, and looking at why involves a deep dive into the science behind what our attention spans are.



Herbert A. Simon's work shaped how we think about attention.



Herbert A. Simon was writing in the early seventies, when the various demands on our attention were not too intrusive.



What is attention?

The Cambridge Dictionary says that paying attention is 'to watch, listen to, or think about someone carefully or with interest' ^[2].

There are a huge amount of demands on this attention, from the advertising messages we see to our families, phone calls, work and a million other things.

Herbert A. Simon was writing in the early seventies, when those various demands on our attention were not too intrusive. We now have our smartphones with us at all times, all loaded with apps. In a matter of seconds, we can go from texting our partner to looking at the news, doing our online banking or playing any one of a million games.

In the words of the UN, the attention economy has replaced the information economy as we have more data than we can possibly need ^[3].

In fact, the advent of what is known as 'big data' means that every single human activity now generates a million data points, from what we buy when we go shopping online, to our payment patterns and resting heart rate.





Debunking the goldfish myth

If you research attention spans on Google, you'll almost certainly find references to a Microsoft study from 2015. This study supposedly says that our attention spans have decreased to eight seconds from the 12 seconds they were said to be in 2000 ^[4].

The study came from Microsoft Canada, who surveyed 2000 Canadians to arrive at the result, but the BBC found that the figure was not from the study itself but from another website that cited sources, none of which backed up the goldfish claim ^[5].

There are no psychologists who will support it, either. In short, nobody seems to know where that goldfish stat actually comes from.

The BBC even found Professor Felicity Huntingford, who has spent a whole career studying fish behaviour. She told them that there is no evidence fish have short attention spans, or even weak memories ^[6].

How wrong we've been about goldfish the whole time!



Felicity Huntingford
FRSE is an aquatic ecologist
known for her work in fish
behaviour.



So how long are our attention spans, really?

The short answer is that we don't exactly know, because this involves giving a simple answer to a hugely complicated question.

It depends on a range of factors, such as what tasks we are switching between and what else is going on. If you're running from a lion, then you're not going to be thinking about how it will inform your next LinkedIn post.

But we can talk about attention spans in general terms.

Dr Gloria Mark is a professor of informatics at the University of California Irvine and an expert on attention spans.

In 2004, she started studying how long people spent on a Word document before checking email. First with a stopwatch and then using more sophisticated computer modelling.

At first, attention spans measured using this method were estimated to be two and a half minutes.

By 2012 this figure had fallen to 75 seconds. And now it seems to have plateaued at 47 seconds ^[7].

This is quite a bit longer than the eight seconds cited by the rogue Microsoft study, but it still has implications, at least for anyone who plans to talk to an audience for much longer than the 47 seconds mentioned by Dr Mark.

But there is another problem. We like nothing more than to switch activities.



Quite a bit longer than the eight seconds cited by the rogue Microsoft study

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At first, attention spans measured using this method were estimated to be two and a half minutes.

160s

By 2012 this figure had fallen to 75 seconds.

75s

And now it seems to have plateaued

47s

at 47 seconds, according to Dr Gloria Mark ^[7].



What switching is (and what it means)

You're working on a document. Then you get a notification on Slack, so you click on it. And then you get another notification that you've got an email, informing you about the Slack message. You take a look and send a quick reply. Then you get back to your document and stay there. Well, until you get another email suggesting you might know someone on LinkedIn.

And so the process continues. This is called switching.

Dr Sophie Leroy is an expert in the field and describes what happens when you switch. Her theory is that when you switch, it leaves behind something she calls an 'attention residue' from the previous task ^[8].

When you move from A to B, part of your mind is still on A, even though you're on B, so you don't give B your full attention.

Psychologist David Meyer says that our productivity can suffer by as much as 40% ^[9]. Despite this, research suggests we really like switching activities, as you'll find out on the next page.





The warm and moreish fuzz of a ‘doom scroll’

There is a disparity between how much people think they are checking their mobile phone and how often they really are. Asked this question in surveys, people estimate that they reach for their phone just 40 times a day. In reality this figure is more like 99 ^[10]. There is a reason for us doing this, and it has something to do with how much our phones are a source of dopamine. Research by Berridge and Robinson suggests that dopamine is less about pleasure than about wanting a reward, looking for it and then expecting it ^[11]. And it means many of the apps on our phone give us exactly that. Looking for an interesting video, news story or other piece of content gives our brains a warm and fuzzy feeling. And as Nir Eyal, a writer, researcher and sometime teacher at Stanford University Business School points out in his book, ‘Hooked,’ it’s even more effective if the dopamine hit is unpredictable ^[12]. That sends us on an excited search for the next like or comment, when what we’re actually craving is the satisfying chemical hit.

And it’s also habit-forming. Looking at your phone and getting a reward sets up what is called a dopamine loop.

As our searching gave us the feeling we were looking for, soon followed by that satisfying feeling of a comment or thumbs up, we’ll keep doing it over and over. You know why the ‘doom scroll’ is a thing? This is your explanation.

It might explain another surprising stat. According to a King’s College study, about 42% of the UK population claim to be ‘positive multi-screener,’ ^[13] highly engaged with this world of jumping between different devices and happy that so much information is so widely available. Perhaps the dopamine buzz overrides the stress of the switch?



You know why the ‘doom scroll’ is a thing? This is your explanation

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A study by King's College showed that 62% of 18–34 year-olds can't stop themselves from checking their mobile phones ^[14].



What this means for you as a presenter

AhaSlides' research results



The impact of distraction on learning and productivity for professional presenters

AhaSlides conducted a survey of 1,048 U.S.-based professionals who regularly deliver presentations - defined by at least one presentation per month ^[15].

Think L&D professionals, trainers, meeting chairs and keynote speakers, among others.

The following data highlights widespread challenges with maintaining audience attention and identifies how presenter roles, tool usage, and frequency influence engagement strategy and presenter confidence.

Want your opinion heard? Scan the QR below to take the survey yourself.





Audience distraction is widespread



82.4%

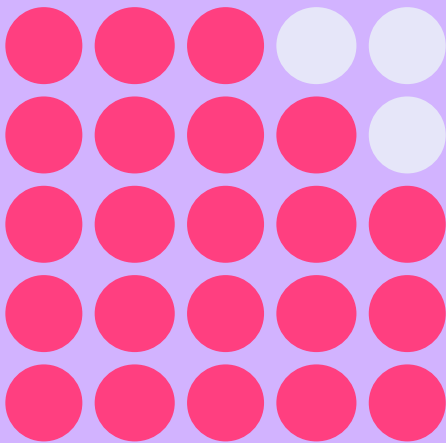
of all respondents report regular audience distraction

Respondents put this down to the following:

multitasking	48.3%
digital device use	43.9%
screen fatigue	41.9%
lack of interactivity	41.7%



Attention is shrinking



88%

of respondents believe attention spans are getting shorter



Reasons for shrinking attention spans

64% say it's down to social media and constant notifications

61.5% think information overload

49.8% say cognitive fatigue / burnout

36.3% blame too many meetings or sessions

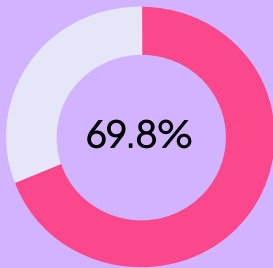
25.8% think changing work or education environments

20.1% attribute it to poor presentation design

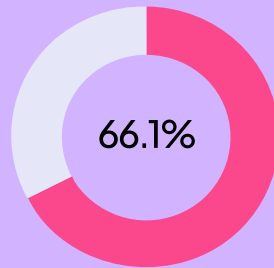
A large majority of respondents believe attention spans are shrinking — 43.2% said “significantly” and 44.8% said “slightly.” Only 7.3% saw no change, and just 3.4% felt attention spans are improving.



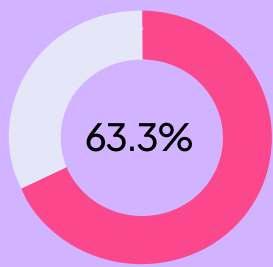
The impact of shrinking attention spans



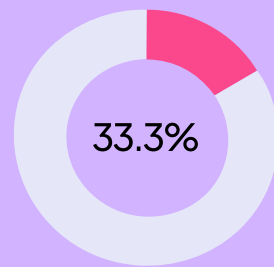
productivity



retention of information



learning outcomes



their job satisfaction

When attention starts to slip, the impact shows up quickly. Nearly seven in ten presenters (69.8%) say it affects productivity, while 66.1% see people retaining less of what's shared and 63.3% report weaker learning outcomes. These aren't abstract effects — they show up in meetings that run longer than planned, sessions that need repeating, and ideas that don't quite land.

There's also a quieter, more personal cost. Around one third of presenters (33.3%) say shrinking attention spans affect how they feel about their work. When you've prepared carefully but still sense the room drifting, it can be discouraging. Over time, that feeling adds up. Taken together, the data suggests that attention isn't a "nice extra" in presenting — it's central to results, learning, and how confident and satisfied people feel when they step into the room.



Defeating distraction during workplace presentations

How 1,048 U.S.-based presenters deal with short attention spans



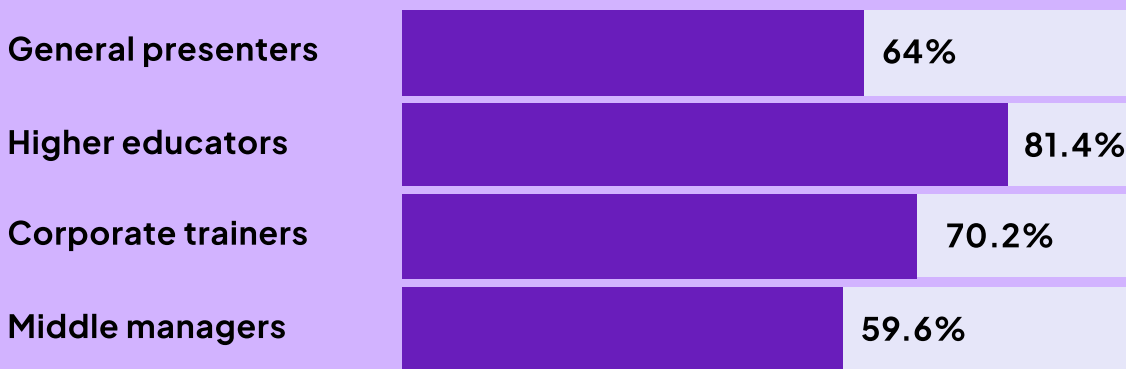
What stands out in this data is that most presenters aren't giving up when attention drops — they're adapting. 62.3% use humour or storytelling, 58.0% build in group discussion, and just over half (51.5%) use movement to re-energise the room. Nearly half (48.3%) turn to interactive slides, while only 1.7% do nothing at all — a strong signal that attention is something presenters know needs designing for.

The most common approaches also share a theme: participation. Varying content formats (46%), introducing interaction, or leaning into gamification (19.8%) all ask audiences to take part rather than sit back. These moments help reset attention and reduce fatigue. In an environment full of distractions, the data suggests that pulling people gently back into the room works better than trying to compete for their focus.



Who is using interactive presentation software?

Presenters who report more frequent distractions are more likely to use interactive tools. This suggests they are actively seeking ways to improve audience focus and participation.



Respondents who use interactive presentation tools report higher confidence levels (45.1% vs. 33.3%), greater use of varied engagement methods, and increased awareness of audience distraction compared with non-users.

In contrast, non-users are more likely to attribute disengagement to boring or unengaging content and are slightly more likely to report using no engagement methods at all (3.1% vs. 0%), reinforcing the link between tool adoption and proactive engagement approaches.



When presentations invite participation

According to AhaSlides platform data, when audiences are invited to take part, they usually do. On average, 80.9% of audiences actively engage with presentations delivered on AhaSlides. Almost half engage with every single interactive slide ^[16].



80.9%

of audiences actively engage with presentations delivered using AhaSlides

44.6%

of audiences actively engage with 100% of interactive pages when presentations are delivered on AhaSlides





How to win (and keep!) attention with your slides

It's tempting to kick things off in your presentation with a nice, juicy statistic. A really big number that you think will stick in their memories and amaze them with your research.

Hold on there.

The research consistently points to using emotional language rather than relying solely on facts to make your case. Almost every reputable piece of research around suggests that engaging your audience's feelings is the key to making your work memorable.

Try using stories and experiences that will resonate with people.

If there is humour and surprise somewhere in the mix, then great. Both of these things have been proven to increase audience engagement and if you can generate them, then there is a good chance you'll have people on your side. Emotion also drives memory, so emoting is good news for whatever information you're trying to impart.

Researchers Joseph LeDoux and James McGaugh show that emotional reactions lead to more activity in the part of the brain called the amygdala, helping to boost memory retention ^[17].

The same research says that emotional moments also trigger the release of adrenaline and cortisol which pushes those memories deeper.



Try using stories and experiences that will resonate with people

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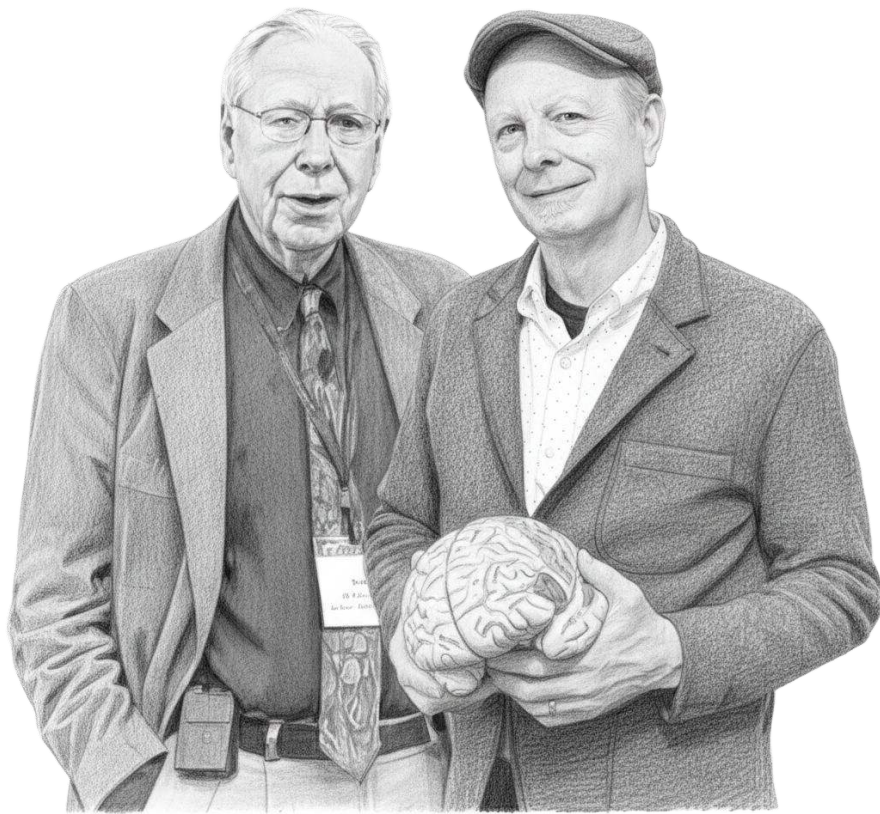
Researchers Joseph LeDoux and James McGaugh show that emotional reactions lead to more activity in the brain helping to boost memory retention ^[17].

Left:

James L. McGaugh is a neuroscientist whose work shows why emotionally charged moments are far more likely to be remembered.

Right:

Joseph E. LeDoux is a neuroscientist known for his research into how the brain processes emotion, threat, and uncertainty.





Why uncertainty is surprisingly effective

If your audience is emotionally engaged, that's a good thing, but if they're also unsure about what to think, then it's even better.

People pay more attention when they're slightly disorientated, so keep some surprises in there.

Research by Marsel Mesulam suggests that this is because our brains' parietal cortex is particularly sensitive to new or unusual things ^[18]. The shock might just keep them off balance and wondering what's on the next slide.

Emotion? Good. Emotion that is partly powered by uncertainty? Better.

While you're keeping audiences emotionally committed and throwing in some surprises, you also need to keep what you're saying nice and simple.

It's good to make your audience work to understand your ideas, but you don't want to make them work to understand how you express them.

The message from the research is clear: keep the messaging simple, because it's easier to retain, and don't let your language get in the way.

Simplicity also extends to the volume of messages you expect people to think about.

Too many, and you'll overload their prefrontal cortexes and create a traffic jam that nothing will get through. The research suggests that we can only keep between four to seven things in mind at any one time, so stay well under this figure.

Even if you do have a number of messages for your audience, keep them spaced out over the lifetime of the presentation. It will make them a lot easier to digest and stop people losing interest. Don't be afraid to keep repeating them to make sure that they are remembered, with frequent recaps.



How to ‘reset attention’ during presentations?

It’s all about the structure. And anyone creating a presentation these days has an important advantage, at least depending on the software they use.

With certain tools, you can make presentations interactive. This means that the audience are no longer passive recipients of information. They can respond to questions, participate in polls, help make word clouds in real time and do a range of other things. As well as making things more interesting, it also delivers a very important benefit: people are much more likely to remember and be involved when they are doing something.

“The level of audience interest at the start of a presentation is high,” says Dr. Graeme Salter, an education technologist and lecturer in an interview with AhaSlides.

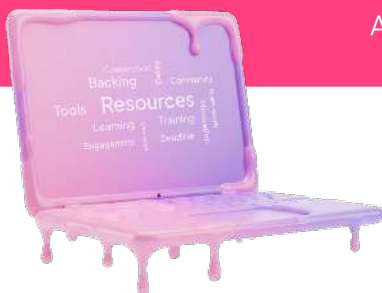
“It tends to drop very quickly and rise again towards the end of the presentation,” he adds. “A good way to fix that is to do a change of state every ten minutes or so.”

By a change of state, Dr Salter is referring to ‘attention resets’, or parts of your presentation that bring audiences back into the room and keep the baseline level of attention higher.

“You don’t want to keep doing the same change of state, you can do different things... I might add a video, tell a little joke, or share a story. You could do a word cloud, a live poll or a multiple choice quiz,” Dr Salter adds.

There are a slew of studies that support this. One of the foundations of it is the fittingly titled ‘The Generation Effect’ from 1978. This supports the idea that being an active part of our learning strengthens our memories ^[19].

“
Attention resets
bring audiences
back into the room
AhaSlides





A study of 225 STEM courses from 2014 showed that students who were engaged in their learning through discussions and group work outperformed ones who attended lectures where their attention was free to wander onto other things ^[20].



Participation wins

Engagement, buy in and learning outcomes can be even better if your audiences are actively participating in the presentation in real time.

The best example of this is the word cloud. This is a simple, but effective way of getting people to contribute. Let's say you're doing a presentation about common objections that their sales teams hear.

Instead of asking people to think of what the objections are, you ask them to input their top ones into software that links to the presentation. That can be used to generate the word cloud on screen in real time and gives you something more immediate to talk about, addressing their immediate concerns and getting them to participate. Active generation is said by some researchers to light up the prefrontal cortex part of the brain ^[21]. It also helps presenters adapt to the live sentiment in the room.

This means that you should break up the slides where you're giving people information that you want them to remember, or act on long after you've finished speaking, with others that get them thinking.

It's not always possible to get people moving around the room, especially if your workforce is scattered across different geographies. But you can get them participating, in real time, with their phones, which also moves them away from their dopamine-boosting social media feeds.



Active generation is said by some researchers to light up the prefrontal cortex part of the brain

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How to design your presentation for every brain

One of the most effective ways to battle distraction is to design our presentations with the brain in mind. And more specifically, the neurodivergent brain, says executive function coach Hannah Choi



I believe that when we understand executive function skills and why they matter, create presentations through the lens of neurodiversity, and consider the role the body's nervous system plays in our audience's ability to focus, we don't just increase engagement, we fundamentally change the learning experience for our audience.

Executive function skills are our brain's upper-level management and reside in our prefrontal cortex, which is located behind our foreheads.

These skills help us regulate our emotions, pay attention, organise our thoughts, and remember things. They help us hold back when needed and move forward when it matters. They allow us to think flexibly and reflect on our experiences.

Audiences rely on executive function skills to focus, engage, and remember what you're teaching them.

As presenters, we use our executive function skills to plan and organise our presentations, regulate our emotions, and manage our time.

It's hard to be "on" all the time, and when stressed, our emotional brain takes over, which limits access to our executive function skills ^[22].

ADHD or other learning differences can impact executive functioning, especially attention and self-regulation, which are needed for engagement.



We must design and present thoughtfully and intentionally... We must keep the neurodivergent brain in mind and lean on approaches that support executive functioning.



Executive function coach
Hannah Choi.



YouGov's 2024 data suggests that 20% of the population has some kind of learning difference ^[23]. Even without a diagnosis, anyone can struggle with attention and focus. Up to 80% of people experience this during meetings, according to polls conducted by the QEll center ^[24] and Udemy ^[25]. To counter it, we must design and present thoughtfully and intentionally. We must keep the neurodivergent brain in mind and lean on approaches that support executive functioning.

Because of the major role that self-regulation plays in accessing our executive function skills, it is beneficial to create an environment that makes regulation easy. We can start with ourselves as presenters. Our presence and internal state has a powerful impact on our audience's ability to learn and engage. Research on mirror neurons, brain cells that mirror the emotions and behaviours of others, shows that emotions are contagious ^[26].

Calm, regulated, and prepared presenters help audiences to feel settled and engaged. Anxious, disorganised, or stressed presenters can spread discomfort. Tone, pacing, body language, and emotional steadiness all contribute to the learning environment.



Brain cells mirror the behaviour of others... emotions are contagious

Hannah Choi



A presenter's ability to self-regulate is not just a personal strength; it is a core component of effective communication and teaching. Neurobiology of Language research in using brain imaging shows that engaging speeches synchronise audience members' brain activity ^[27]. More compelling presentations activate shared language and social cognition networks, which suggests that engagement supports not only attention, but shared understanding and connection.



We must also consider the design of the presentation itself. Starting sessions with a brief mindfulness activity can be very effective for increasing engagement, though you may hear grumbling at first.

To support attention, the environment must be as close to distraction-free as possible. When asked to focus, many neurodivergent brains benefit from some stimulation. Providing your audience with fidget toys is a fun and effective way of maintaining attention.

Clear expectations about bio breaks, online presence, and opportunities to participate help your audience relax and be open to new ideas.

Slide presentations that support executive functioning may look a little different from your typical (and boring!) format. Clean slide design reduces cognitive load and encourages people to listen, not read the words on the slide. Clear structure, timing, and signposting allow our audience to anticipate what is coming. Brain breaks, movement, and interactive activities keep brains engaged and interested.

Activities that involve the audience and ask them to use their flexible thinking will encourage them to participate, leading to better attention. This is exactly why I am such a fan of AhaSlides. When it's fun and easy to pay attention, it's easier to learn.

Presenting for every brain is no longer optional. It is critical that we design and present through the lens of executive function skills, neurodiversity, and self-regulation if we're going to win the battle against screens, AI, and reduced attention spans.

Research across neuroscience, education, and organisational psychology supports this approach. You'll benefit as a presenter and your audience will learn and keep coming back for more.





The short term power of engagement

Great presentations do more than inform. They connect. They energise. And they leave an impression that lasts far beyond the final slide. That's the immediate power of engagement.

With tools like AhaSlides, presenters can transform passive audiences into active participants—turning meetings, lessons, and events into dynamic two-way conversations. Whether it's through a quick poll, a cheeky quiz, or a spontaneous word cloud, engagement software creates moment of buzz that change the entire room.

Distraction fades. Boredom gets replaced by curiosity. The invisible barrier between speaker and audience starts to dissolve.

Suddenly, everyone has a voice—not just the confident few. The quiet ones chime in anonymously. The unsure ones test their understanding without judgement. And the room starts to reflect something real: the thoughts, questions, and needs of the people in it. It's instant feedback, without the awkward silence.

Engagement also gives presenters a powerful tool: the ability to hold up a mirror to the room. Are people following? Are there gaps in understanding? How do they feel? Are they on board? Presenters no longer have to guess what's landing—they know, and have the instant data to back it up. That means they can adapt in real time. Fill in gaps. Reinforce what matters. And give their message a fighting chance to stick. Engagement doesn't just make your presentation better. It makes your audience feel seen, heard, and part of something. And when that happens, people remember what you said—and how you made them feel.



Suddenly everyone has a voice, not just the confident few

AhaSlides



The compounding power of engaging presentations

The true value of engagement doesn't stop at one session. It builds.

When presenters consistently invite participation, something powerful begins to happen over time. You don't just create one memorable session—you build a track record. A data trail of participation and engagement that shows what's working and what's improving. Over time, this helps trainers, educators, and team leaders fine-tune their delivery, adapt to their audience, and make learning outcomes measurable and meaningful.

But the real magic? It's human.



Regular interaction builds trust. And when people feel heard often enough, they start to speak up more freely. Over time, this fosters psychological safety—the kind of environment where questions get asked, ideas get shared, and connection grows stronger.

Engaged spaces become cohesive ones. People feel seen, heard and part of the process, not just passengers. They're more likely to retain what they learn, collaborate with others, and come back for more.

And let's not forget the presenter. The more engaging your sessions are, the more your reputation grows. Whether you're leading a workshop or running a company-wide meeting, consistent engagement sets you apart.

Become known not just as a speaker—but as a connector. A builder of teams and a catalyst for change.

That's the compounding power of engagement. It grows with you. And it grows because of you.



People feel seen and part of the process in engaged spaces. They're more likely to retain what they learn, collaborate with others, and come back for more.



Say goodbye to sleepy slides and distracted teams

Winning and keeping attention is hard, and it can take practice. We need to think about how we present things.

- Use language designed to grab people's attention
- Don't just rely on facts but on their emotions
- Use uncertainty to keep people engaged
- Don't overload people with too many messages
- Make your presentation interactive where you can
- Create attention resets every ten minutes to increase attention
- Involve people in the process of learning for improved learning outcomes
- Design presentations for every brain, including neurodivergent ones

You won't be surprised to hear that we think that AhaSlides is a good way of doing that, as it has been built on some of the research we've talked about here. There are lots of ways that you can use our platform – live Word Cloud, Quiz, Poll, Q&A, Spinner Wheel and Survey – which all come with instant analytics so you can see what's landing, who's with you, and what they know.

AhaSlides was built with the same, core idea in mind that Herbert A. Simon came up with all those years ago: keep people's attention, as that can be the start of great things.

Good luck with your presentations. Feel free to get in touch if you think we can help you or your team present better amid this growing attention crisis.



ahaslides.com

Book a demo: hi@ahaslides.com

You can also add us on WhatsApp by scanning this QR code:



Sources

- [1] <https://web.archive.org/web/20170226081021/https://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/awweb/awarchive?type=file&item=33748>
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- [6] <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-38896790>
- [7] https://ics.uci.edu/~gmark/Home_page/Publications_files/CHI%2016%20Multitasking%20and%20Focus.pdf
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