

Would an Ancient Stoic Get Distracted by a Personal Electronic Device?

I am easily distracted. I am distracted by my personal electronic devices (PED) and I have observed that I am not the only one. I waste time on media of all types and procrastinate on more important tasks. What would the ancient Stoics have thought about all of us wandering around with our heads down looking at screens? Seneca did not have an iPhone, but he was concerned about the use of time. Could his words below apply?

It's not that we have too short a time to live, but that we squander a great deal of it. Life is long enough, and it's given in sufficient measure to do many great things if we spend it well. But when it's poured down the drain of luxury and neglect, when it's employed to no good end, we're finally driven to see that it has passed by before we even recognized it was passing. And so it is – we don't receive a short life, we make it so.

It sounds as if Seneca might have squandered some of his time. I suspect the tendency to get distracted is part of the human condition, whether in Seneca's time or today. He might have walked around staring at a tablet made of wood and wax or a papyrus scroll. At least he was not performing safety-critical tasks on a pipeline.

Several of us have been discussing the appropriate use of personal electronic devices in control rooms. In August 2010, PHMSA issued an advisory bulletin that stated: *Owners and operators of natural gas and hazardous liquid pipeline facilities should integrate into their written procedures for operations and maintenance appropriate controls regarding the personal use of PEDs by individuals performing pipeline tasks that may affect the operation or integrity of a pipeline.* Does your company have appropriate controls?

I have been in control rooms where controllers could use their devices at will for “fatigue mitigation.” I do not think all of the uses of their devices I observed are for fatigue mitigation. I have been in other control rooms where devices could not be used at the console.

Some control rooms have written policies that range from no use at all to prudent use. Some of the policies state that if the controller is seen using the device, he or she is subject to corrective action. Other control rooms have no written policies. I think controllers in most control rooms can use their personal electronic devices and they are supposed to practice self-control, so they do not get distracted. How is your self-control?

I have been thinking about my personal practices, my self-control, when I work in control rooms. I need to avoid using my device for personal reasons - looking at Facebook, Linked In, Instagram or texting about some trivial matter. What type of example do I set for controllers and other clients? I need to follow the advice of Marcus Aurelius and use my time and attention for worthy actions and important tasks.

It is essential for you to remember that the attention you give to any action should be in due proportion to its worth, for then you won't tire and give up, if you aren't busying yourself with lesser things beyond what should be allowed... —Marcus Aurelius