CHAPTER 1

How did we get so goddamn busy?

Recently Brad was chatting with a mate, a very intelligent and successful medical doctor who is living the quintessential life: nice house and car, two kids and a dog. Actually they have a cat, but you get the idea.

Brad recalls talking to them about the family juggle and how they each manage the balance between work, relationships, self-care, the kids' school commitments, playdates, sport, medical appointments and everything else that goes with modern parenting. Throw in kids' gastro or brushes with COVID and you've got yourself a personal DEFCON 1 nightmare. He asked his mate, whose kids are a few years older than Brad's, how

he manages all the competing priorities. There was silence for a while then a deep sigh. 'Who says I do?' They started mulling over past generations of parents and family and wondered if the lives in the 'family unit' (as we call it in psycho-babble) had always been under this much strain.

The answer? Yes … and no. Brad recalls growing up in the 1980s with two parents who worked extraordinarily hard and managed the juggle very well. They didn't appear to be running around like busy idiots. He had a clear picture in mind of his father coming home and launching into the usual chores — cooking dinner, cutting wood for the fire in winter, and no doubt arguing with his sons about chipping in. But when he left work, he left work. There was a clear delineation between work and home. Sure, in the event of some catastrophe he might get a call on the home phone, but there were no micro connections to work. No email, no group chats, no online shared workflow boards … When he was home, he was home.

We're not here to demonise technology. We recognise it's just one factor contributing to a new generation of unproductive busy idiots, but our work and research has convinced us that it is playing a major role and that its influence begins early. And we don't believe society has paid enough attention to the risks or side effects, especially over the past 10 years.

We challenge you to ask any primary school teacher how many kids aged five to seven in their class struggle with attention and focus. Then ask them whether this is different from 15 years ago. We understand a 'straw poll' isn't great science, but we think you'll find most of them report that historically it would be one or two children per class, whereas now it's more like four to six per class. The first smartphone arrived

in 2007. Okay, so the academic researcher in Brad knows that correlation does not mean causation, but you can't tell us that's pure coincidence!

For us older humans (otherwise known as adults), we are all exposed increasingly in our personal lives to short-form videos (TikTok, Insta reels, YouTube shorts). While we complain that our teenagers can't stop watching short video clips, most of the time we're guilty of a fair dose of hypocrisy. Studies have shown that adults who frequently watch short-form video clips are prone to shorter attention span and are less accurate on tasks and less productive. You only have to see how short-form video clips are pushed in the mainstream media to know it 'works'. Have a look at any major newspaper online, and you'll soon find a section of short clips for quick consumption. What can we do about this? Don't worry, we have you covered. Chapter 2 will give you a roadmap.

In Brad's research lab 2000 Australian kids were surveyed in the largest study of its kind in the country. It found the average Aussie teen spends 9.5 hours a day on recreational screen use (phone, laptop, streaming, gaming, social media). This has been steadily increasing over the past decade.

We now have a generation of teenagers using screens and technology almost 10 hours a day outside of school. These teenagers will be the next crop of bright-eyed, ambitious workers running our global companies. Do they know how to maintain a healthy relationship with technology? All indications suggest they don't. Anyone at a mid-size to large organisation will tell you those staff in their twenties are a huge asset because of their tech-savvy skills. But for most of them their biggest asset is also their weakness. They don't know how to live with a Sustainable Tech Blueprint. And it's our fault, because we don't either, and you can't teach what you don't know.

Learn how to harvest tech with the Sustainable Tech Blueprint

Over the past five years we have rolled out technology at work and at home at breakneck speed. Most of this was with good intentions and productivity in mind, some of it by necessity given the circumstances we all found ourselves in around 2020. The world will never be the same. You can launch a business from your living room. You can work from a tropical beach in an exotic location many miles away from the major cities where we used to congregate. And perhaps best of all, many of us have adopted a hybrid model that has cut our commute significantly.

We found a panacea, right? Well, not so much. What we didn't plan on was the struggle for work/life balance, increased rates of burnout, lack of human connection and loneliness. And this is by no means an exhaustive list of the unintended consequences, but rather just a few of the more common ones.

We need to learn how to harvest technology, and not let technology harvest us.

This is precisely what we teach in workshops for organisations big and small. We call it the Sustainable Tech Blueprint. It has five steps (see figure 1.1):

1. **Sustainable awakening.** We are all in a kind of trance, allowing technology to creep into more and more areas of our lives and steal our attention. Before we can do anything, we need to *wake up* from this trance and open our minds to a different path.

2. **Sustainable knowing.** Knowledge is power. This step is all about the persuasive design that tech companies commonly use to attract and hold your attention.

3. **Sustainable audit.** This step is a deep dive into how you use technology. It asks that you hold up a mirror to see if your tech use is consistent with how you want to live. Don't worry, there are no reality-show mirrors in this step; we use an old-school tick-a-box questionnaire.

4. **Sustainable harvest.** How many of us have tried to rein in our tech use only to slip back into old habits? We use a series of 'harvest trees' (see pages 29–36) to find solutions that fit your goals.

5. **Sustainable grounding.** Grounding is all about getting back to living! By spending less time running around like busy idiots we gain control of our lives (as discussed in chapter 6).

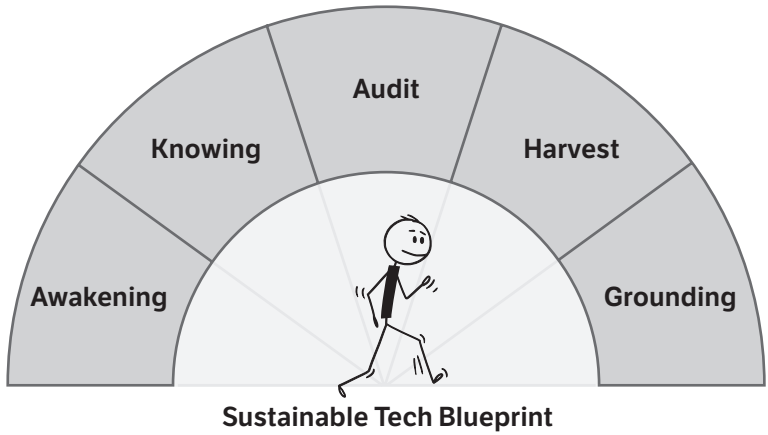

Figure 1.1: the five stages of the Sustainable Tech Blueprint

Sustainable knowing: learn the tenets of persuasive design

For any of you perceptive souls playing along at home you may have noticed we skipped *sustainable awakening*. The fact is everything you have read up to this point *is* your awakening. In buying this book you made a conscious decision to tackle the cycle of busyness. Awakening means being a willing participant in examining your own tech use and its impact. You made it this far, which means you are ready to tackle *sustainable knowing*, which delves into the world of *persuasive design*.

Persuasive design is the practice of applying a set of social and psychological principles to influence behaviour. It is commonly used in organisational management, e-commerce and population health interventions, often with positive net effect. It has also been used for the past 20 years or so in the tech industry to drive attention, traction, revenue and profits. Many of us are familiar with the concept and have a general idea of what it means, but don't understand the mechanics behind it. It's important to understand these mechanics if you plan to hack back the busyness trap.

A disclaimer here. There are a few books that cover some of these topics. You may have read them already. One thing we can guarantee is that our explanations are written in simple language and won't turn into a peer-reviewed thesis. You see, it's one thing to have an understanding of persuasive design, but it's quite another to be able to interpret how that impacts people at work and at home. Here's our quick-fire introduction to persuasive design.

Bartle's taxonomy: how your personality profile is used against you

Richard Bartle worked in AI before it was cool to do so. In the 1990s he coined a taxonomy that described four main 'player' profiles in any game. He suggested that we all fall into one of the following four profiles, and we derive our motivation for continuing to play the game from that core need being met:

1. *Achievers* focus on achieving the goals set in a game or app and attaining the status that comes from that.

2. *Killers* focus on winning at all costs and direct competition with peers.

3. *Socialites* focus on social interactions and networking within the game or platform.

4. *Explorers* focus on exploring and are motivated to discover new things.

This framing formed the basis of modern game design. It also heavily influences the design of the apps and social media you use at work and at home. If you are still scratching your head to think of a relevant example in your current tech blueprint, here's a subtle one most people can relate to.

You've no doubt been to a big work or industry conference or another huge event held at a major hotel or convention centre. Were you ever asked to download the conference app? It's for your convenience and will make the day run smoothly! Both are probably true, but it's also likely that the app is littered with persuasive design aimed at driving engagement, especially with the speakers and sponsors of the event who have typically paid money for their time in the spotlight.

A few years ago Brad attended a major conference on the Gold Coast in Queensland. A good friend and gaming addiction specialist, Dr Kim Le, was presenting a keynote on the final day. On day one it occurred to Brad that the conference app was gamified, with typical elements of game play like social competition, competitive rules and promoting a point system for completing certain tasks. Create a meeting hub connection (Socialites), 500 points. Visit an exhibitor (Explorers — after all, they are ensuring the financial viability of the conference), 1000 points. Add your photo in the profile settings (Socialites). And for the Killers (thankfully not in the literal sense) and Achievers, there was a live feed leaderboard!

Dr Le decided he would illustrate Bartle's taxonomy in his keynote and proceeded to use his power for evil, rising to the top of the leaderboard and explaining how he claimed the victory during his keynote. Being the only other person in the room with an in-depth understanding of persuasive design, Brad of course found this highly entertaining. The conference convenors, not so much. The prize was a free pass to the conference the following year. We don't think our good friend ever received that prize! Okay, so is Bartle's taxonomy of player profiles harmful to us as humans when used to drive engagement at a conference? Probably not. But as we noted at the start of this chapter, knowledge is power, so think about how your user (player) data and profile inform how technology targets you, persuading you to stay engaged. Your attention is the commodity.

Flow: how you lose track of time

Flow refers to the idea that all technology and app design is based on continuing to increase the level of difficulty for the user while at the same time increasing the level of skill required to operate that app or program. This magical middle ground

between the two is referred to as 'Flow' and is associated with the distortion of time. Quite literally, we spend more time in that world than we consciously intend.

To ensure we're not demonising the modern workplace, let's use an example with more personal responsibility attached. Almost a decade ago Brad was working at a university in the Sydney CBD. Every morning he would join the masses on the train commute.

A side note: Next time you are on public transport put your phone away for just 10 minutes and count how many people you can see who have done the same. It won't be many. In our observations it's usually under 10 per cent. And of those who don't have their phone in their hand (like Brad, Joff reads his Kindle!), they are usually listening to music but are at least observing the world around them.

Back to Brad's train commute. Every morning he would catch the train from his inner-west home to the CBD. There was usually a corporate worker in the same carriage (three rows up) who was completely obsessed with the mobile app game 'Candy Crush Saga'. For those of you who are not familiar, the object of the game is to line up the fruits or candies so they magically disappear, triggering lights, sounds and points flashing. Each level requires more skill than the last, which makes it like a game of Flow. And every morning our poor friend from three rows up would lose track of her surroundings and often miss her stop. It became a running evening debrief between Brad and his wife, Ashlee.

Ashlee: 'Did candy crush lady make her stop today?'

Brad: 'No, but she was so close this time. She made it up the stairs right as the doors closed on her. Do you think I should tap her on the shoulder tomorrow when it's her stop?'

Ashlee: 'Hmm… I know you're trying to be helpful, but that would be weird.'

So the game of closing train doors continued.

Brad still thinks about that lady, and wonders if her innocent obsession with Candy Crush Saga that stole her attention and time ever impacted her life in other ways? At home? At work? Okay, it's weird, but this is the stuff that keeps Brad up at night.

Dopamine: how tech biohacks your neurochemicals

We could write a whole book on this but we won't, because you'd likely fall asleep while Brad geeked out on the neurochemical jargon. So let's keep it simple.

Dopamine is a feel-good chemical. You can find it in most things humans enjoy: chocolate, drugs, sex… Tech platforms are incredibly good at delivering dopamine. Especially when the apps or platforms driving our use are social in nature. Dopamine delivery can be measured by various scans including a functional MRI (fMRI), which will show which areas of the brain light up in response to different stimuli. Tech platforms can achieve this by using what was once known in the industry as 'dopamine labs' to test design features and how well they deliver dopamine. For example, TV streaming platforms will test multiple combinations of colours, brightness and sounds to optimise dopamine delivery to the user.

In 2014, a Scandinavian research lab ran an fMRI study in which they made what we believe is one of the most important discoveries in the field of screen and technology addiction. They discovered that the levels of dopamine in 'offline' games, although significant, were not as high as the levels of dopamine when playing online.

What does that mean? When you make something more social, it delivers a bigger dopamine hit. Even if you never meet these people in the real world! The more phone data and WiFi we enable in our work and home lives, the more we seek that dopamine.

Now, here is a cool (and by cool we mean incredibly scary) note. The dopamine hit we get from our technology devices is very small and constant. It does not crescendo. It is what's known as anticipatory dopamine. We never get the full hit, just the anticipation high. This results in a constant loop of craving technology without ever feeling satisfied.

The near-miss effect: falling just short, but you still get a dopamine hit

This effect, also known as the 'fun/failure effect', occurs when your tech sets you a task and you come so close to achieving it but you fall just short. You keep trying despite not getting there, and seldom become discouraged!

Pop quiz: This element of persuasive design has its origins in which industry?

That's right, gambling. This is the basis of most poker (slot) machines. You can lose on a given spin but the machine goes off with lights, sounds, fireworks, as if you've won! You have a net loss in financial terms, but you are encouraged to spin again.

Business apps use this design method too. Think of the business networking social media or platforms we commonly use. The constant feedback around how much of your profile or goal you have completed (usually given in a percentage bar) and notifications and prompts to complete the task. Why are they so detail oriented about this? Engagement. Your time *is* the commodity in advertising and other revenue streams.

The hyperpersonal effect: how online content is more powerful than the real world

This effect refers to how the emotional power and cognitive salience of anything said online can be more powerful than the same thing said in person. Put simply, a comment (good or bad) about you personally or your work performance made in an online chat group, workflow platform or email chain can have far greater impact than if it was said around the office. It is part of the reason we are driven to use the tech our workplace affords us.

Social comparison theory: how tech undermines our self-worth

This is linked to the hyperpersonal effect, but distinguished by the need or drive to compare our failures and successes with those of others we see online. Constantly comparing ourselves can drive busy idiot behaviours in an endless loop and throw us off what we set out to achieve for that hour, morning or day.

The Work From Home (WFH) and hybrid work movements were not the starting bell for Social Comparison Theory, but they sure do afford us an abundance of examples. We all have a friend or work colleague who always seems incredibly switched on at virtual meetings — well dressed and alert, with an array of serious-looking books behind them. Or perhaps the meeting platform has provided them with impressive props that include a mahogany desk and a 16th-floor city view. Clearly one of life's winners.

The truth is often far from what is portrayed. In reality, beyond this carefully contrived set the rest of the house looks like a bomb hit it, and the kids are drawing on the walls or one step short of sibling assault. Welcome to social comparison theory.

We compare ourselves to the perfectly manicured version we see online, rather than the reality.

Brad has a confession. He too is guilty of playing to the social comparison theory. A few years ago he was doing a live TV cross with famed Australian news anchor Michael Usher. The world saw his perfectly staged bookshelves, his suit jacket and sharp haircut, not his shorts and Ugg boots just out of camera shot. They didn't see his toddler son crash through the baby gate he had installed (yep, definitely not a handyman) and fall face first down a flight of stairs during the broadcast. It crossed his mind that he could be the next viral meme of a live TV interview with a screaming child crashing the party. But those who watched the nightly news from home, they saw only another expert preaching from the comfort of his perfect home. Brad recently told Michael Usher that story when they worked together on another project. He had no idea of the chaos that unfolded at the Marshall house that day. Definitely felt like a busy idiot moment.

The Zeigarnik effect: why we can't resist the 'pings'

This phenomenon refers to our tendency to recall uncompleted tasks better than tasks we have completed. Extending this into social psychology, it is the desire to seek out a logical conclusion to social interactions. Just think on that one for a moment. We need to know what happens in any social interaction. It's how we are wired as humans. We crave it.

How do tech companies play on the Zeigarnik effect? It's another one that we will try to abbreviate with a few examples, but you will see it everywhere your life intersects technology.

A few years ago most software updates for smartphones and messaging platforms on computers and tablets rolled out amazing

advancements. You could now see who had read your message and what time they received it, which risks drawing you into overdrive paranoia: *Mike read that message, so what's his problem? Why hasn't he responded to my proposal? Maybe he doesn't like it. Is this going to affect my performance review next week?*

That is the Zeigarnik effect in action. The constant need to understand the social outcome in any given situation. And it doesn't just happen at work. Think about how many messaging apps we get stuck reading when we are supposed to be living life. How many times have Joff and Brad disappeared down a rabbit hole, reading messages from our Fantasy Premier League chat group (yes, we're both football tragics) when we should be doing focused work or watching our kids' sport?

Understand persuasive design's endgame

Charlie Munger was the vice-chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffett's right-hand man and the architect of the investment firm's modern philosophy. Charlie once said, 'Show me the incentive and I'll show you the outcome.'

AI/social media experts and industry whistle-blowers Tristan Harris and Aza Raskin refer to this technology as 'first generation AI'. We'll touch on 'second generation AI' later in the book.

The endgame is this: *attention + focus = revenue*. Plain and simple. We don't doubt many tech companies start with noble intentions to improve our lives, but you'd be hard pressed to find one that doesn't employ persuasive design to turn you into a busy idiot. Persuasive design in technology prevents you from working efficiently during the working day. This leads to long hours, the blurring of work/life balance and an overwhelming feeling of busyness.

RECAP

How did we get so goddamn busy?

1. **The Sustainable Tech Blueprint**

    - *Awakening:* Tune in and reflect on your tech use at work and at home.
    - *Knowing:* Understand the power of persuasive design.
    - *Auditing:* Evaluate whether your tech use is consistent with how you want to live.
    - *Harvesting:* Use decision-making trees to wrestle your tech back into line with your goals.
    - *Grounding:* Get back to spending time on meaningful and enriching activities.

Top tip: Learn how to harvest technology, rather than letting technology harvest you!

2. **Persuasive design**

    - Bartle's taxonomy teaches us about player profiles and what drives us to consume tech.

- Flow is a design feature used by apps and tech to keep the user engaged, which often induces a sense of time lost.
- The near-miss effect is a design feature in which the achievement or goal is slightly out of reach, yet it still delivers a dopamine hit to the user.
- Dopamine is a feel-good neurochemical released by tech.
- The hyperpersonal effect recognises the greater emotional power and 'pull' of online rather than offline connection.
- Social comparison theory refers to the human compulsion to compare our successes and failures with those we see online.
- The Zeigarnik effect acknowledges that we crave a logical conclusion or outcome to social interactions.

Top tip: Think about how your tech targets and commodifies you, persuading you to stay engaged.