

University of Notre Dame  
**Notre Dame Magazine**

---

## Gotta Have It Now, Right Now

BY **Ronald J. Alsop**

Published: Winter 2011-12 Posted In: [Current Affairs](#) and [Society & Culture](#)



As I write this article, I am struggling to resist the urge to peek at my email. I realize that checking it would partly be an escape for me when the words don't flow freely. But I also may be a perfect example of how technology has intensified people's need for instant gratification.

### Related article

#### [Wired for Rewards](#)

Even though I don't know what my inbox might hold, it's that uncertainty, along with the expectation I just might find a gratifying message, that makes me want to look.

David Greenfield, founder of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction in West Hartford, Connecticut, likens my email experience to playing a slot machine. I'm not going to feel the excitement of winning a jackpot, but subconsciously I realize that a waiting message could contain a bit of good news. "The hit when you get a good email is like the hit of winning money," says Greenfield. "It provides instant gratification."

Whether on our computers or at casinos, we are indeed a culture increasingly driven by our need for instant gratification. We want — no, demand — everything right now. Once a virtue, patience is becoming as rare as handwritten letters.

Examples of the need for instant gratification abound. A friend who works at a Williams-Sonoma store was fuming one day recently when a shopper called him incompetent and demanded his name and the customer service number so she could report him. The crime: She had to wait 10 minutes to pay for her bag of pasta.

Everything from on-demand movies to scratch-off lottery tickets to instant messages has heightened people's sense of urgency. At Walt Disney World, FastPass tickets cut your wait time for the most popular rides. Cosmetics marketers promise a facelift in a flash with products like Maybelline Instant Age Rewind. Online, instantly downloaded music purchases have put record stores out of business. And there's no need for high school seniors to worry for long about college admission decisions: Apply "early decision" and learn your fate within a month or so.

"Things are happening so fast and information can be obtained so quickly that it does bias us toward instant gratification," says Darrell Worthy, assistant professor of psychology at Texas A&M University. "Five or 10 years ago, I would have been more able to sit down and read an entire journal article. Now I tend to read through the abstract and figures more quickly. I'm focused on acquiring the gist of things."

Although people save time and may even be more productive in our accelerated world, the need for instant gratification raises concerns about our work ethic, social interactions, character development, even our mental health. Some people are so impatient and so driven by instant technology that they never unplug, never slow down. They don't take time for contemplation and relaxation, and, according to some mental health professionals, they are at greater risk for addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, video games and the Internet.

A number of societal trends, including easy credit and unfettered consumer buying before the Great Recession, the explosive growth of legalized gambling and the technology revolution, have stoked people's desire for instant gratification. At the same time, our business and government leaders also demonstrate little tolerance for moderation and long-term planning. Staggering federal and state budget deficits show a reckless lack of self-control, and Wall Street's fixation with short-term results puts pressure on companies to deliver quarterly gains at any cost. That mentality, along with personal greed, accounted in large part for the financial scandals at Enron, Tyco and other companies a decade ago, and for the extreme risk-taking that brought down Lehman Brothers and the world economy in 2008.

A "spend now, save later" mindset also figured strongly in the housing market collapse. While predatory lenders took advantage of unqualified prospects in the subprime mortgage crisis, the homebuyers were also to blame for their unwillingness to delay a home purchase until they truly qualified for credit. Their parents likely worked extra hours or took second jobs as they scrimped and saved to buy a home, but who can wait that long anymore?

Financial experts fret about people's failure to delay gratification and save money, especially for their retirement years. "I feel that America has become the culture of now, the culture of present consumption," says Stephen Utkus, a principal with the Vanguard Group's Center for Retirement Research. "It's a major problem that people can't get over their present-day bias and plan for retirement. And the financial system has been an enabler with the easy access to credit."

The U.S. personal savings rate began dropping in the mid-1980s, the era of Madonna's "Material Girl," and has never come close again to the double digits of the 1970s and early 1980s. Meanwhile, consumers' debt load rose steadily during the previous decade, peaking in 2007 just before the economy cratered.

Wanting things faster is by no means a new phenomenon. The Polaroid instant camera was invented in 1948, the same year the first McDonald's fast food restaurant opened. FedEx created its powerful international brand with the 1980s ad slogan, "When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight." At about the same time, the microwave oven became a kitchen staple and the plastic squeeze bottle took the anticipation out of pouring Heinz ketchup.

But the world moves ever faster, and it seems that people are becoming less and less patient. Remember the days when waiting for a dial-up connection for the Internet seemed perfectly reasonable and gave you enough time to grab a cup of coffee? Now if a high-speed connection takes more than a few seconds, people complain to their Internet provider.

Can't stand waiting a few seconds for search engine results? Now, Google Instant reveals possible matches while you're still typing in your request. Google determined that people type slowly, taking 300 milliseconds between keystrokes but only 30 milliseconds to glance at another part of the page and scan it. If everyone around the world uses Google Instant, the company estimates, they will save more than 3.5 billion seconds a day in Internet search time.

That figure is something the millennial generation would surely appreciate. The need for speed is especially pronounced with millennials, who literally grew up on technology. They were born in the 1980s and 1990s as, first, personal computers and video games, and, later, the Internet and cell phones came to dominate our lives.

My teenage son and other millennials find it hard to believe that their parents once had to sit through television commercials, search for a pay phone to make a call if their car broke down and spent hours in the library combing through books for college research papers. A college intern who worked for me recently didn't know what I meant when I suggested he look in a telephone directory or call directory assistance when he couldn't quickly track down a source on the Internet for an article he was writing.

Helicopter parents who hover over their millennial children have fed into the need for instant gratification by intervening to solve every problem, buying them the latest in fashion and technology, and dishing out praise for even the smallest accomplishment.

Because many things have come easily to millennials, they aren't always willing to pay their dues. Some educators and employers worry that their work ethic isn't as strong as that of previous generations and that they are willing to cut corners and even cheat in school to get what they want now.

For their part, millennials make no excuses for their impatience. Nearly three quarters agree that they want instant gratification, according to a survey by the career center at California State University, Fullerton, and Spectrum Knowledge, a research and training firm in Cerritos, California. "It is almost an innate instinct of ours to receive instant feedback for something we do, not because we are greedy, careless or selfish but because we grew up that way," Kristin Dziadul said in a post on Social Media Today, an online community for PR and marketing professionals. "Many people criticize our age cohort because we are this way, but consider how you would respond to things if you grew up experiencing feedback or rewards after everything you did."

As millennials grow older, their need for instant gratification is extending well beyond the virtual world. Teachers find it harder to engage millennials in class because many want fast-paced, interactive lessons that entertain them. I once sat in the back of a classroom at the University of California at Berkeley and observed a fascinating discussion of business ethics. I was appalled that several students were checking email and surfing the Internet rather than paying attention.

Struggling to compete with YouTube and Facebook, some professors try to connect lessons with popular music and movies. Others give condensed reading assignments rather than entire books. And some schools even provide students with video iPods for online lessons.

While I applaud such creativity and dedication to trying to motivate students, I believe such approaches could shortchange them. Already many students aren't developing the sound problem-solving skills they will need in their lives and careers. They don't take time to do the thoughtful research that ambiguous problems — the stuff of life — require.

Millennials also expect near daily praise and feedback from their teachers and bosses, as well as rapid promotions and steady pay increases. Julie Heitzler, human resources manager at the Orlando Airport Marriott Hotel, sometimes feels she should be further along in her career at age 29. Yet when she looks around at her peers within Marriott, she finds that she is one of the few millennials at her level. "As I'm growing older and younger millennials are entering the workforce," she says, "I am starting to see that some of the expectations, especially timing, we have for our careers can be unrealistic."

Millennials' reward mentality is proving to be a major challenge for employers around the world. I recently spoke at a college recruiting conference in Venice, Italy, where employers complained about their excessive expectations. "They don't want to wait," Federica Gianotti, a recruiting specialist for Iveco, an Italian truck and bus manufacturer, told me. "It's always 'What can the company give me?' not 'What can I give the company?'"

The Great Recession and its aftermath have certainly thwarted millennials' desire for instant gratification in the form of a dream job. "There's a lot of pent-up frustration," says Jim Case, director of Cal State Fullerton's career center. "They're not getting jobs and a lot of postponement — marriage, buying a house — is being forced on them by the economy."

As the millennials demonstrate so vividly, it's technology and gadgets, from social networks to smartphones, that have really put our culture on steroids. Mobile phone owners between 18 and 24 years of age exchange an average of 109.5 text messages a day, according to the Pew Research Center, and 90 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds sleep with their phones. One new bride recently posted the happy news on her Facebook page — as she was walking out of the church. Some surveys even show that people check texts and answer cell phones while having sex because they simply can't wait to see who's contacting them.

While the millennials epitomize the instant gratification culture, the next generation could want things even faster. Some parents are giving babies and toddlers cell phones, iPads and other tablet devices loaded with entertaining applications that may or may not have any educational value. A new survey from Common Sense Media found that 10 percent of children under age 2 have used mobile devices, as have 39 percent of 2-to-4-year-olds and more than half of 5-to-8-year-olds. The growing number of televisions, computers and mobile devices in homes and automobiles recently prompted the American Academy of Pediatrics to warn parents to limit children's time in front of video screens so they have time for creative play and interaction with other people.

To be sure, ever-faster technology can be beneficial when it connects us to the right information in seconds. Some people maintain that instant technology not only is rewarding, but it also makes them more productive. Many pride themselves on multitasking on computers and mobile devices. But a growing body of scientific research shows that multitasking is a myth. The need for stimulation from multiple sources simultaneously plays havoc with our brains and our performance. A Stanford University research study in 2009 concluded that people who are being bombarded with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch from one job to another as well as those who complete one task at a time.

People can talk on the phone while answering emails and watching a video, but their focus is split and performance suffers. What's more, the compulsion to check email, send texts and talk on cellphones becomes extremely dangerous when people are driving. The National Safety Council estimates that more than a quarter of all traffic crashes — over 1.6 million a year — involve cell phone calls or texting. Some lawyers even call mobile phone use the DWI of the 21st century.

The need for a quick technology fix is making people not only less focused but also less considerate. Inevitably, perhaps, instant gratification comes at the expense of civility. Although it's impolite and annoying to others, people these days routinely check their email and send texts in the middle of dinner with friends, during business meetings or while speakers make presentations at conferences.

At a performance of *The Color Purple* on Broadway, friends of mine had to endure texting between the woman seated next to them and her husband a few rows behind. The couple couldn't stay focused on the play that they had paid over \$200 to attend and didn't mind disturbing those around them.

Such behavior recently prompted the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago to ask patrons to refrain from texting until intermission. Glowing phones on vibrate may be quiet, but they can be quite distracting in a darkened theater. "When people live in the now, they want to share their experiences in real time; they can't wait to announce that they're blown away by the play they're watching," says David Rosenberg, Steppenwolf's communications director. "But for us at the Steppenwolf, sending texts and tweets during the performance is distracting and unacceptable. Actors complain that they can see the lights from the texting, and more audience members are saying they're distracted from the play."

A few of those texting and tweeting theatergoers might be looking for a date after the play. That may seem like short notice, but some of the latest mobile apps promise the ultimate in speed dating — or at least hookups. While traditional online matchmaking services mean weeks of searching profiles and meeting potential mates, new mobile applications, such as Blendr and OKCupid Locals, offer instant gratification by connecting people in the blink of an eye. Through location-based technology, the apps reveal who is nearby and might be up for a drink, a date or just a sexual encounter.

Such quick and easy connections could devalue relationships and lead to an obsession with sexual hookups. Of course, the need for instant gratification underlies most addictions, whether to sex, drugs, alcohol or gambling. Now some therapists believe people suffer from Internet addiction because they're hooked on social media, video games, and online gambling and sex sites. There is even debate among therapists over whether to add Internet addiction to the next edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Some universities, including Notre Dame, provide counseling services for Internet addiction, and specialized treatment centers offer both outpatient and residential programs to people who lack the impulse control to disconnect from computers and smartphones.

"We try to prevent our children from gambling, but there isn't the same cultural awareness about how addicting digital technology can be," says Hilarie Cash, executive director of the reStart Internet Addiction Recovery Program in Fall City, Washington. "Parents aren't placing the appropriate boundaries around Internet use; they don't understand how addictive the gratification can be from constant text messaging and online game playing."

Since it opened in 2009, the reStart therapeutic retreat center has attracted about 40 young adults, mostly between the ages of 18 and 28, whose online obsession interfered with their college studies and their offline relationships. The patients spend at least 45 days at the center where they receive therapy and have no access to digital technology. Many also need to develop better daily habits, including hygiene, exercise, diet and sleep.

While most people won't fall victim to an addiction, some mental health professionals and academics worry that we are so connected to the Internet and smartphones that we aren't taking time for contemplation and relaxation.

Mark Zupan, the dean of the Simon Graduate School of Business at the University of Rochester, finds updating his microeconomics textbook with his co-author much more efficient these days using the Internet rather than doing research in a library. But he told me that he sometimes longs for the time when he could lose himself in a library for three or four hours without any interruptions. He also misses the days when he couldn't access email from airplanes. "Now if I'm on a flight where I can get email, I feel that I have to go through all my messages before we land," he says. "That used to be time to read and relax."

Indeed, downtime and thoughtful reflection are essential to sound decision-making, creativity and innovation. Breakthrough solutions to problems don't come easily or quickly — or through Google searches. In fact, a friend of mine won't let his children use Google for their homework until they have tried to figure out answers through plain old thinking.

"We have devalued the time we spend alone just thinking, but it's that time for reflection that leads to the big ideas," says Daniel Forrester, the author of *Consider: Harnessing the Power of Reflective Thinking in Your Organization*. "Multitasking is espoused and almost glorified in the United States, but it is dehumanizing us and making us less creative."

There are some signs of resistance to constant connectivity, particularly on social networks. An online group called the Anti-Facebook League of Intelligentsia pledges "to revive man's ability to experience life" and celebrate "a spirit of self-sacrifice in place of self-indulgence."

To most people, waiting is a waste of time, a feeling that technology only accentuates. But Harold Schweizer, an English professor at Bucknell University, begs to differ. He is an ardent advocate of the value of waiting and has written a book titled *On Waiting*. To him, waiting and delaying gratification can be regenerative and restful, as well as a time for inspiration and fresh ideas. Instant gratification, on the other hand, must be frantically repeated and is in the end "no gratification at all," he says. "Indeed, instant gratification is perhaps the endless delay of gratification."

He has incorporated pauses and waiting time into his teaching to give students more time for unexpected insights about a poem or other piece of literature. "Objects and experiences acquire value through the act of waiting," he says. "If instant gratification devalues, if impatience is a form of greed, perhaps patience, then, is a generosity, an intentional giving of one's time, a giving of oneself."

So there's truth in that old chestnut — what's worth having is worth waiting for. Successful entrepreneurs certainly must have a tolerance for delayed gratification. Watching their dream come to life in a new product or company is rewarding, but they know it may take years to see a financial payoff.

Delaying gratification can take practice. For most people, willpower doesn't come naturally. That's why FranklinCovey, a training and consulting firm in Salt Lake City, Utah, sees a new business opportunity in teaching "urgency addicts" to manage their time by focusing on what really matters on the job and in their personal lives. "As humans, we have always been wired for instant gratification, but technology has kicked up that biological need," says Leigh Stevens, a partner in FranklinCovey's productivity practice. "We have to stop the madness and be deliberate about choices. We have to learn to act on the important and not react to the urgent."

Some people have developed their own individual strategies to try to control expectations for instant responses to messages. Ron Culp, a public-relations consultant and director of the graduate program in PR and advertising at DePaul University, checks his email frequently and may write replies right away — but he doesn't hit send. Instead, he sets up the responses so that late night messages don't go out until the next morning. That way, people won't start expecting instant responses no matter what the hour.

Others take breaks from being connected 24/7 by exercising without any electronic appendages. Schweizer at Bucknell, for example, slows down by hiking, bicycling and kayaking on the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. "I move my arms and legs in the rhythm of my body, in the rhythm of the time that I am," he says, "and I recover a little."

The Pew Research Center found in a 2011 survey that 29 percent of cell phone owners turn off their mobile devices for a while just to get a break. That's what Kate Robertson does sometimes. She also removes email from her iPhone every few months so she isn't constantly checking it and can take time to really enjoy conversation with friends or a stroll around the streets of downtown Chicago where she works.

"It's nice to think and just observe what's around me," says Robertson, a project manager at Eduvantis, a consulting and marketing services firm for colleges and business schools. "Do I really have to see the latest Groupon offer immediately?" But the 30-year-old concedes that she feels lost without her phone, especially because of its music and maps. "And I do get excited when I receive a message," she says. People get instant gratification from their phones, she believes, because they feel "like they are loved, that they have friends looking for them, friends responding to them."

When people like Robertson decide to untether themselves from technology, they may need to prepare their Facebook friends and other online connections, who expect the gratification of an instant response.

"There is social pressure to be immediately responsive," says David Levy, a professor in the Information School at the University of Washington, who advocates balancing technology with meditation and contemplation. "It's becoming harder to create protected space and time for yourself because it might be read as being uncaring or unavailable by others."

He and other experts strongly encourage parents to help their children develop the ability to delay gratification and lose their sense of entitlement. Parents and teachers can make young people work more to earn rewards and privileges, praise them when they exercise self-discipline and show them the value of taking time to think reflectively. "We need to reward self-control in children rather than focus on building their self-esteem," says Roy Baumeister, a social psychology professor at Florida State University and co-author of *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. "The two traits that most predict success in life are self-control and intelligence."

Research indicates that some individuals may have a predisposition to either impulsivity or self-control. Some 40 years ago in the most famous study of instant gratification, children at Stanford University were told they could eat one marshmallow right away or wait 15 or 20 minutes to get two. Some couldn't resist the temptation; other held out longer in anticipation of a bigger treat.

Follow-up studies with some of the children as adults revealed that the tendency to seek instant or delayed gratification didn't change over time. What's more, the children who waited longer at age 4 later scored significantly higher on the SAT, were better educated, felt a stronger sense of self-worth, coped more effectively with stress and were less likely to use cocaine/crack than those who couldn't delay gratification.

"As a group, those who could not stop themselves at 4 could not at 40," says BJ Casey, director of the Sackler Institute for Developmental Psychobiology at Weill Cornell Medical College. "This appears to be a personality trait that is relatively stable." She and fellow researchers observed differences in the brains of the two groups in one of the follow-up studies (see related story), but she says it isn't an issue of either nature or nurture. "We know that experience can turn genes on and off. Even early experiences could have shaped the behavior of the 4-year-olds and those experiences could have continued."

Whether we are governed more by nature or nurture, Mother Nature sometimes takes control and shows us we can't always get the instant gratification that comes even from something so basic as electricity. An editorial in the Westport, Connecticut, newspaper in September suggested that people suffering power outages from Hurricane Irene should try to patiently accept the fact that "the plug is pulled on instant gratification" and they can't always be first in line to get what they want — their electricity restored.

I agree with the editorial's premise based on recent firsthand experience. After losing heat and electricity for six days following the freakish October nor'easter in New Jersey, I learned to survive without lights and my desktop computer and even without my cars, which were trapped in the garage by nonfunctioning electric door openers.

Resourceful people, including myself, were still able to get our hit of instant gratification — and caffeine — by recharging ourselves and our mobile phones and laptops at the local Starbucks. It became my town's central meeting place, as people swapped stories about the storm and shared extension cords to make the most of the limited number of electrical outlets.

Turns out we can give up the comforts of a cozy, warm room, refrigerated food and even our cars much easier than the instant gratification of texts, tweets, email and Facebook connections.

---

*Ronald Alsop is a freelance journalist and the author of eight books, including his most recent The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace. He can be reached at [ronald.alsop@gmail.com](mailto:ronald.alsop@gmail.com) or [thetrophykids.com](http://thetrophykids.com).*

The magazine welcomes comments, but we do ask that they be on topic and civil. [Read our full comment policy.](#)

Like

**Add New Comment**

[Login](#)



Type your comment here.

**Showing 0 comments**

Sort by popular now ▾

M [Subscribe by email](#) S [RSS](#)



Copyright © 2012 University of Notre Dame  
Notre Dame Magazine



538 Grace Hall Notre Dame, IN 46556  
P: 574.631.5335 F: 574.631.6767 E: [ndmag@nd.edu](mailto:ndmag@nd.edu)