How to block distracting apps on your Android phone

Like many modern information workers, my personal phone serves many purposes. It's how I communicate with friends and family; it's how I experience entertainment; it's how I navigate around a city; it's how I purchase my morning coffee; it's how I control countless smart home devices; and so on and so forth. It's also crucial to how I perform my job, by letting me keep on top of the never-ending news cycle and communicate with my co-workers and other contacts through Slack and email.

Managing that dual-purposeness of my phone has always been a challenge. It's all too easy to just idly open Twitter or Slack on a Saturday while I'm standing in line to pay for groceries or waiting for my kid to finish brushing their teeth, and then get sucked into a vortex of work-related activities. Apple and Google's various screen-time-limiting functions haven't helped, either. Sure, they let me set a timer for *how long* I'm allowed to use Slack or Twitter on a given day, but what if I don't want to be allowed to use it at all on the weekends? The same goes for other methods, like deleting the apps every weekend and reinstalling them on Monday, which presents their own annoyances and headaches.

ActionDash's new Focus mode scheduler does things Google's own Focus mode doesn't yet

ActionDash, an app for Android phones that brings Google's Digital Wellbeing features to older phones and builds on top of them for phones that already have Digital Wellbeing, is launching a new feature that is designed to specifically address these problems. With the latest version of ActionDash, I can set specific time blocks for when the phone will prevent me from launching or using apps that I specify. If I'm also using Action Launcher, the app icons will be grayed out on my home screen, giving me another visual indicator the app is

being blocked before I even attempt to open it.

Should I try to open an app that’s being blocked, ActionDash will display a graph of how much time has been spent in the app over the past week and let me know when the current block timer expires (at which point I can resume using the app). If I want to override the block, I have to go into ActionDash’s settings and disable it, after waiting 15 seconds for a timer to expire. It’s just enough friction to prevent me from casually disabling the block when I’m bored.

This new Focus mode scheduling can also be used during the workday to block distracting apps such as Instagram or Twitter. But I’ve found it most beneficial in helping keep me off the clock in the hours that I’m not supposed to be working. Last weekend, I was able to keep myself out of Slack and Twitter for the entire weekend thanks to ActionDash smacking my hand each time I tried to open the app. After a few hours of digital scolding, I even stopped reactively opening Twitter every time I unlocked my phone, and either found something else to do or just used my phone for what I needed to do – and moved on, without getting engrossed in social media feeds or work stuff.

On Monday morning, the Focus mode schedule expired and I was able to resume accessing Slack and Twitter on my phone, as they are crucial tools during my workday. Come evening, another Focus mode timer kicked in and I was blocked from using Slack or Twitter when I was supposed to be decompressing from work and enjoying time with my family.

Sure, this kind of programmed babysitting feels a bit like a Band-Aid on a larger problem, but it's the first real solution to managing these issues that I've found to work for my needs. I'm not really interested in using my phone less or making it harder to do the non-work things I use it for; I just want to be able to avoid using the phone for work when I'm doing other things. ActionDash's Focus mode automatically switches my phone from Work Mode to Life Mode in a convenient way.

There is some room for improvement in Focus mode's scheduling. In order to make a weekend-long block, I had to program two different timers — one for Friday evening and one for all day Saturday and Sunday. I also can't disable different apps at different times — Focus mode will only block the same set of apps when it's enabled. An option to block, say, Instagram during the work day and then Slack at night would be nice to have. And while ActionDash does have some nice integrations with Action Launcher, it doesn't work as smoothly with other app launchers, such as the default one that comes on your phone or another third-party option.

Still, if you're looking for a way to easily manage your work-life balance with an Android phone, Action Dash's new Focus mode is a good way to get started. The app is available for free with a $6.99 in-app purchase to unlock all of its features.

Here's how to set up the new Focus mode scheduling feature:

- Download ActionDash from the Google Play Store and give it access to the appropriate permissions.
- Open ActionDash and tap the Focus mode banner.
- Create or enable the time block schedules during which

you want the apps to be disabled. If you want to create a block for an entire weekend, including Friday evening, you'll have to create two separate timers.
- Select which apps will be disabled during the blocked-out period.

You can also manually trigger Focus mode from the ActionDash dashboard or a Quick Settings toggle in the notification tray.

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