

How to Stay Focused by Managing Workflow Interruptions

To maximize productivity you need to minimize distractions. Three steps to getting more done

Merge Gupta-Sunderji || June 18, 2015



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If it feels like you're constantly shifting your attention from priority to priority and continually struggling to refocus, you're not alone. A 2006 Basex study found that people spend an average of 2.1 hours each day dealing with and recovering from interruptions. In other words, 28% of a workday is used up just trying to stay on track!

Constant interruptions—endless emails, incessant IMs, or ceaseless phone calls—don't just cost you time, they also diminish your effectiveness. A study conducted by the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of London found that people who were distracted by incoming email and phone calls saw a 10-point drop in their IQ— equivalent to missing an entire night of sleep, and twice the effect of smoking marijuana. Business professionals also face an onslaught of unscheduled meetings, in-person drop-ins, and the lure of social media.

Is it possible to stay focused and get things done in the face of this information onslaught? Here are three strategies to help you concentrate amidst the chaos.

PLAN FOR INTERRUPTIONS

The reality of the workplace is that you're never going to get rid of disruptions and disturbances. Emergencies or unexpected situations, demands for your specialized expertise, and other peoples' disorganization all mean that people need your time and attention.

Once you acknowledge that interruptions are a way of life, you can begin to plan for them. When you are establishing deadlines, agreeing on timelines, or simply organizing your daily schedule, accept that things will go awry at least once or twice and build some buffer time into your plans. Leave a portion of your day unaccounted for to allow you to absorb the unanticipated. If you schedule yourself too tightly, even the slightest interruption will throw a wrench into your workflow.

TAKE CHARGE PRE-EMPTIVELY

You don't have to be a victim of circumstance. Proactively deal with interruptions before they occur. Switch off your instant messenger. Send your phone directly to voice mail. Turn off the sound that notifies you when an email arrives. You don't always have to instantly jump for other peoples' priorities. Just make sure that you set aside time periods to check messages two or three times daily so that you can get back to people within a reasonable period of time.

Reserve blocks of time in your schedule during which you are not to be disturbed, and make a pact with your staff

and co-workers that only a fire in the building is reason enough to interrupt you. Since your colleagues would probably appreciate quiet time as well, it shouldn't be too hard to get agreement. Use this time for priority activities that require your full attention.

SPEAK UP

When someone interrupts you by showing up in your office or cubicle, use a fallback phrase such as "I'm in the middle of something at this moment, can I check back with you this afternoon?" or "I've got a lot of fires I'm fighting right now, can you send me a meeting request?" Alternatively, you can set an implicit time limit: "I've got five minutes to spare. Is that enough or do we need to schedule some time for this later?"

If you take a phone call and it's beginning to stretch out longer than needed, modify your fallback phrase into a closure phrase such as "I know you're busy, so I'll let you go," or "If that's all you need, I have to get going." Using such phrases trains your staff and colleagues on how to work with you. Over time, they'll learn to interrupt you less.

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Constant interruptions in your work life control you only if you let them. If you're willing to think strategically about how to manage interruptions, then it is possible to stay focused and get things done.

Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a speaker, author and consultant whose leadership development practice focuses on turning managers into leaders and people power into results. Through large-audience keynotes, small-group training, one-on-one mentoring, and customized consulting, Merge has given over 65,000 professionals in eight countries specific and practical tools to help them achieve leadership and communications success.

MORE WAYS TO STAY FOCUSED:

[Ban the "Drive-By" to Boost Productivity »](#)

[How to Accomplish More by Procrastinating »](#)

[The True Cost of Interruptions »](#)

[How to Psych Yourself Out of Online Distractions »](#)

[The One Distraction You Must Avoid »](#)

How do you minimize distractions and maximize productivity? Share your strategies using the comments section below.

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