

Managing Your Interruptions

Everyday interruptions at work can be a key barrier to managing your time effectively and, ultimately, a barrier to your success.

Think back to your workday yesterday and consider for a minute the many interruptions that occurred. They may have been phone calls, emails, conversations with patrons in the library, coworkers stopping by your office, or anything else that unexpectedly demanded your attention and, in doing so, distracted you from the task at-hand.

Because your day only has so many hours in it, a handful of even the smallest interruptions can rob you of the time you need to achieve your goals and be successful in your library work.

More than this, they can break your focus, meaning that you have to spend time re-engaging with the thought processes needed to successfully complete complex work.

The key to controlling interruptions is to know what they are and whether they are necessary, and to plan for them in your daily schedule when they truly need your attention. This webinar will help you do that and in turn prevent or minimize interruptions from frustrating you and jeopardizing your productivity and levels of success.

Interruptions are a normal part of work life, especially if you are a smart and talented worker or manager. It's natural for your colleagues and staff to want to talk to you if you can help them with their work.

Whether you answer difficult questions, provide guidance, or point people in the right direction, helping others can be a valuable service to your team and your library.

That being said, interruptions can also be a tremendous drain and time waster. The key to handle interruptions effectively is to ensure that you are making the best use of your time in each case.

One approach to eliminate interruptions would be to close your door, unhook your telephone, and get all your work done without any distractions. Having no interruptions would certainly increase your own personal

productivity, but this would be a short-sighted victory.

A key insight that the higher levels of time management provide is that the overall productivity of your team, your department, and your organization is often much more important than your own personal productivity.

This is especially true if you are a manager or team leader; your true productivity is based on the output of your entire team, not just your own. As your level of responsibility increases, you have a much greater impact on the productivity of everyone around you.

With this insight, interruptions take on a whole different light. Instead of always being time wasters, some of them become opportunities to help increase the productivity and effectiveness of your team.

If spending a few minutes with a colleague allows him or her to continue working productively rather than staying stuck on a problem for hours waiting for you to become available, the return on your small time investment becomes substantial.

The key is to distinguish the important interruptions from the true time wasters and handle each in an appropriate way.

Determine the Nature of the Interruption

The first thing you must do in order to manage interruptions effectively is to get in the habit of identifying the type, importance, and urgency of the interruption as quickly as possible.

Your primary goal should be to find out enough information about the interruption to decide the best way to handle it. Keep asking questions until you have enough information to decide.

Establish Regular Visiting Hours

Even valuable interruptions have a cost. A typical interruption may take anywhere from five to fifteen minutes to complete, and it may take you another fifteen minutes just to get back on track.

A good strategy to balance the need for uninterrupted time to get your own work done while remaining available to your teammates and colleagues is to set aside regular 30 to 60 minute blocks for visits. This is very similar to the way college professors set up regular "office hours" for their students.

Inform your staff that these visiting hours are the best time to get in touch with you for non-emergency questions, discussions, or problem that are not preventing them from doing productive work.

Emphasize that if they have a genuine emergency or can't do productive work until the issue is resolved, they should come talk to you right away, but otherwise they should try to wait until the regular visiting hours.

It is better to setup two or three small visiting hour blocks each day (one in the morning, one after lunch, and one towards the end of the day) rather than a single large one since it reduces the amount of time people have to wait to get in touch with you.

Taking Control of your Interruptions

Staying focused is vital to accomplishing your goals and being productive. During the workday, several interruptions may keep you from getting your job done. How should you deal with these types of interruptions?

1. Non-work calls to your cell phone.

Unless you use your cell phone in your work, keep it turned off so that personal calls go to voicemail. Return urgent calls during a break in your work. Everything else can be returned in your free time.

It's important to let your friends and family know that you don't want to be bothered with calls at work unless it's an emergency. Once you stop answering calls at all times of the day, they'll get the hint.

2. Co-workers or patrons stopping to "chat."

If a co-worker or patron stops to chat and you're busy doing something, kindly tell them that you're in the middle of a task or working with another patron and that you will stop by to see them when you get a minute (Co-worker) or hope to see them before they leave (patron). If you're not busy, it's ok to chat a bit if your library allows it. This can build patron relationships, camaraderie and good working relationships. You can always cut idle conversation short with the simple phrase, "I need to get back to work!"

3. People coming into your office or to your desk asking questions while you're working or maybe even while you are eating lunch. Consider saying

this, "I want to give you my undivided attention, so let me finish this work item, or salad, and then I'll stop by to see you."

As with the "chat" interruption above, this allows you to control the time you invest when you actually do connect because you'll be at their workspace. You can walk away when you're done and not get trapped in your own office or cubicle.

Here are some suggestions:

Be honest: When someone says, "Gotta minute?" do they really mean one minute? Hardly ever! Respond, "Actually, I have just one. Will that be enough or can I call you back at 3:00?"

If someone enters your office and begins talking nonstop, wait until he or she takes a breath, and then say, "Joan, I want to talk to you about this, but I've got my back up against a deadline right now. Would it be okay if I called you in an hour?" Let people see you enter the appointment in your calendar so that they feel heard.

When you don't have time for an interruption and allow it to occur anyway, you're not doing yourself or the interrupting party a favor. That person isn't being heard because you're not listening, and you're not completing a high-priority item. Most people are happy to schedule a more convenient time.

Use verbal tactics and body language: If someone barges into your office without knocking or without asking whether it's a good time to talk, stand to greet the person. When you remain standing, your visitor is unlikely to sit. State how much time you have from the outset. "I have seven minutes to chat" makes it clear that your time is limited.

After your visit is over, politely signal nonverbally that it's time to go. Shuffling some papers, turning slightly toward your computer, or stretching sometimes works. If your visitor ignores your cues, say, "Well, that's it then! Thank you for stopping by." Simultaneously walk toward your colleague and edge toward the door.

Place a clock strategically behind you: If you must have a chair in your office, place a clock behind you in view of anyone sitting in the chair. During unavoidable interruptions, periodically turn around and glance at the

clock. When you do so is very important. You should never check the time when the other person is talking, because that's rude. However, when you begin speaking, you can casually turn around while talking, check the clock, and continue speaking without missing a beat. This is very subtle but sends a message to the person that you are on a schedule and watching the clock.

Practice the "slow stroll": You've tried everything. You've begun answering your phone and doing work in front of the person in your office, but they still won't leave! You could try putting down your pen purposefully, turning to face them, leaning forward, looking them right in the eye, and saying, "Thanks for dropping in. You'll have to excuse me now because I need to get this project finished."

If that still doesn't work, stand up. Interrupt them and say, "Hey, why don't you accompany me while I go grab a cup of coffee." Start walking toward your door, placing your hand on their arm to guide them if you must. Keep walking. They will follow you. Walk quickly to the coffee machine. Pour some coffee and say, "I've got to run to the restroom! See you later!" Then make a quick getaway!

4. Handling e-mails or instant messaging.

Unless you need to regularly check e-mail in order to manage the tasks you're working on, I suggest checking it no more than 3 times a day. Once when you get to work to see if there is anything urgent for the start of that day, once before going to lunch and again at about 3:30 PM to process replies before the end of your workday. Also, consider disabling the alarm that announces arriving e-mail.

It's a good habit to completely process your Inbox at the end of the day. You'll feel a sense of satisfaction at seeing an empty Inbox. Keep in mind that processing messages doesn't necessarily mean answering them at length. You might send a quick response and then mark the message for follow-up. Or perhaps you'll move the message to another folder for processing later.

However you deal with your messages, it's a good idea to set aside time in your schedule to manage your e-mail. That might be at the end of the day, right after lunch, or a couple of times during the day that best fit your schedule. To make sure you remember to process all of those waiting messages, consider adding an item to your Calendar and setting a reminder

for it. When the reminder appears, stop what you're doing (assuming it's not critical) and take time to weed through messages.

Keep your instant messaging turned off unless you use it in your work. In that case, react only to those messages that are urgent. Deal with less important messages when you're not in the middle of a project.

5. Working on multiple projects.

Studies have shown that multi-tasking is actually counterproductive. Key in on one project at a time. You'll be more effective at getting it done in less time, and you'll do a better job on it. Your mental and creative energy will be focused and not distracted by what the other tasks may be demanding.

Also, the sense of accomplishment from completing one task will energize you for the next project.

We all deal with interruptions in our workday, so it's up to us to manage them. Hopefully, these tips will help you remain more focused and productive

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Own It!!!

Experts estimate that the average American is interrupted 73 times per day. At work it is estimated to be every 5-7 minutes!!

Some people find this number to be high, others find it extremely low. It depends on what your definition of an interruption is. My definition is anything that you didn't want to, or expect to, happen at that time. I equate an interruption to a weed in my garden – if it doesn't belong there, or if I don't want it there, it is a weed. Same with an interruption.

So how do you avoid getting sidetracked? Own your interruptions if you can. It is not always easy, and it depends on what your job is, and who is interrupting you, but try it!

Own your interruptions. Start to think of an interruption as an offer, and your decision as to whether you will take the interruption as a counter-offer. It is okay to say "Thanks for your call/visit. I do want to speak with you, but

now is not a good time. Can we talk/meet at 2:00 p.m. instead?" There. You just counter-offered. See if it works. It is certainly worth a try.

Grade your interruptions. Let's face it – some interruptions are more important than others. You probably need to take interruptions from certain people, like your boss, a sick child, etc. But not everyone. So be selective and if an interruption comes in that does not make the grade, don't take it!

Create do-not-disturb time. If you don't like the idea of "Visiting Hours" that we discussed earlier, utilize a "do not disturb" sign at the office when working on a tight deadline, close your office door, set "office hours" for visitors and colleagues, or go work in a conference room or coffee shop where you can hide.

Use a post-it note wisely. Before you take an interruption, write down the very next action you were planning to take, how long you thought it would take, and whether you can delegate it to someone else. Often, the interruption itself is not as bad as playing catch-up after it. Taking the time to write down where you are and what you need to get back to can help you save precious time.

Plan for interruptions. If you work in an interruption-rich culture, you can only plan out 50% of your time to allow for 50% interruptions. For example, if your job is to put out "fires" all day, you can't avoid interruptions as they are exactly what you should be handling. An example of this would be a sales manager in a car dealership whose job is to support the sales team on the floor, and to control and manage issues as they arise. This individual will be less able to avoid interruptions and should plan for them in his or her schedule, by blocking out time before or after "floor" time to get his or her project-related work done.

Stop the interrupter. It is worth noting that supposedly 80% of our interruptions come from 20% of the people we come into contact with. Try to identify the frequent interrupters and start coming up with ways to cut them off before they occur. If you know someone always calls you to confirm a meeting, send a quick text/e-mail to let him or her know you are still on as scheduled. Or better yet, explain that it is your policy not to miss meetings and you do not need a reminder, and that you will call in the rare event you need to cancel. Start taking control of the interruptions before they occur and stopping them at their source. Then, you won't need to "own" as many interruptions in the first place.

Techniques to Help You!!

1. Task charting is a technique that can be used to organize a particular assignment. Steps include: starting by identifying the task goal and determine what needs to be accomplished; thinking through all the steps needed to complete the task; arranging the steps in logical order; assigning a symbolic value to each step that will indicate whether the step is the start or end of the process, an ingredient needed for success, an action needed to complete a step, or a decision needed to complete the process. Examples of task-charting include Gantt and Pert Charts.

Pareto Analysis

Choosing the Most Important Changes to Make

Pareto analysis is a very simple technique that helps you to choose the most effective changes to make.

It uses the Pareto principle - the idea that by doing 20% of work you can generate 80% of the advantage of doing the entire job*. Pareto analysis is a formal technique for finding the changes that will give the biggest benefits. It is useful where many possible courses of action are competing for your attention.

How to Use the Tool:

To start using the tool, write out a list of the changes you could make. If you have a long list, group it into related changes.

Then score the items or groups. The scoring method you use depends on the sort of problem you are trying to solve. For example, if you are trying to improve profitability, you would score options on the basis of the profit each group might generate. If you are trying to improve customer satisfaction, you might score on the basis of the number of complaints eliminated by each change. The first change to tackle is the one that has the highest score. This one will give you the biggest benefit if you solve it.

The options with the lowest scores will probably not even be worth bothering with - solving these problems may cost you more than the solutions are worth.

Example:

A manager has taken over a failing service center. He commissions research to find out why customers think that service is poor.

He gets the following comments back from the customers:

1. Phones are only answered after many rings.
2. Staff seem distracted and under pressure.
3. Engineers do not appear to be well organized. They need second visits to bring extra parts. This means that customers have to take more holiday to be there a second time.
4. They do not know what time they will arrive. This means that customers may have to be in all day for an engineer to visit.
5. Staff members do not always seem to know what they are doing.
6. Sometimes when staff members arrive, the customer finds that the problem could have been solved over the phone.

The manager groups these problems together. He then scores each group by the number of complaints, and orders the list:

- *Lack of staff training:* items 5 and 6: 51 complaints
- *Too few staff:* items 1, 2 and 4: 21 complaints
- *Poor organization and preparation:* item 3: 2 complaints

By doing the Pareto analysis above, the manager can better see that the vast majority of problems (69%) can be solved by improving staff skills.

Once this is done, it may be worth looking at increasing the number of staff members. Alternatively, as staff members become more able to solve problems over the phone, maybe the need for new staff members may decline.

It looks as if comments on poor organization and preparation may be rare, and could be caused by problems beyond the manager's control.

By carrying out a Pareto Analysis, the manager is able to focus on training

as an issue, rather than spreading effort over training, taking on new staff members, and possibly installing a new computer system.

Key points:

Pareto Analysis is a simple technique that helps you to identify the most important problem to solve.

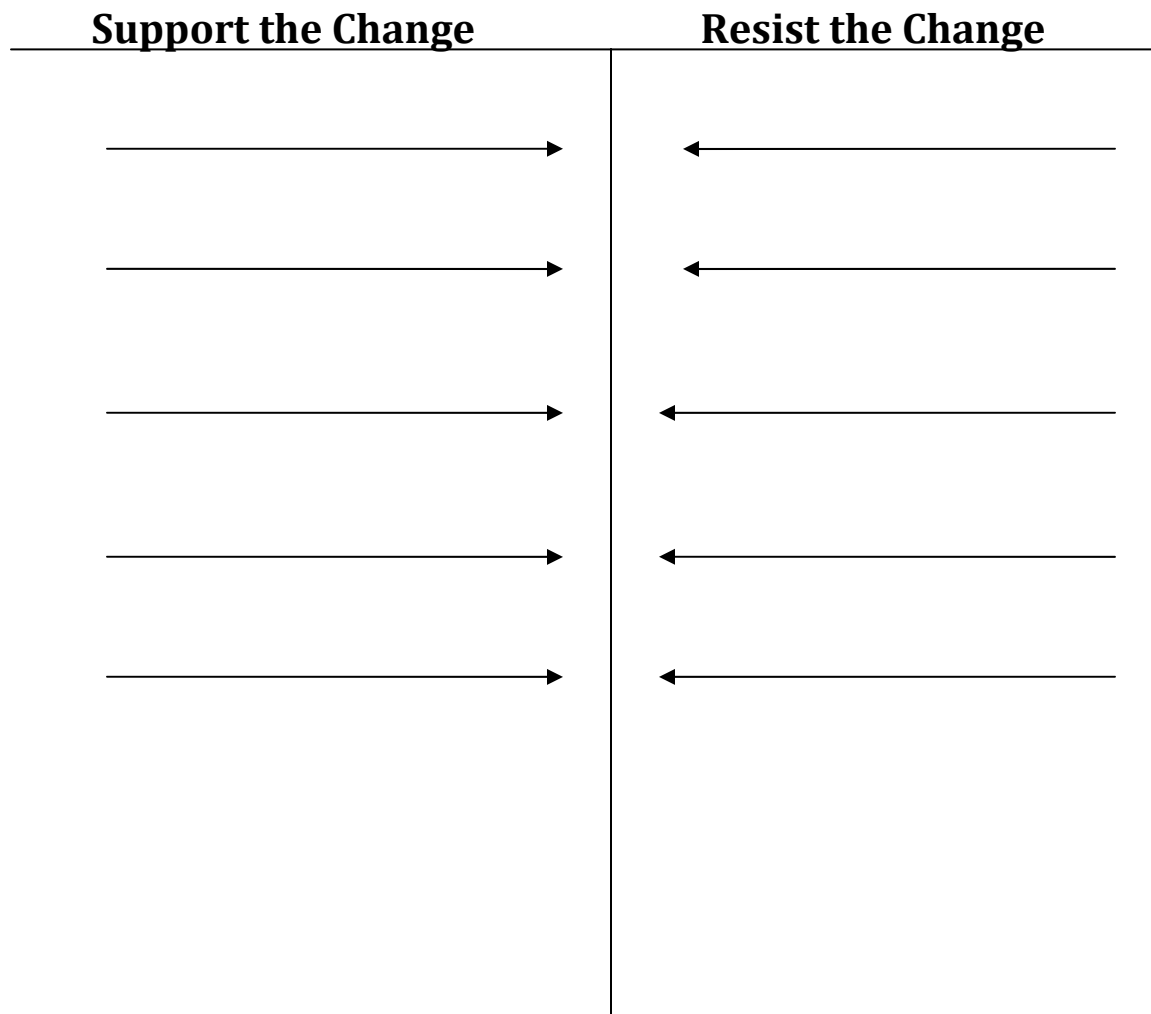
To use it:

- List the problems you face, or the options you have available
- Group options where they are facets of the same larger problem
- Apply an appropriate score to each group
- Work on the group with the highest score

Pareto analysis not only shows you the most important problem to solve, it also gives you a score showing how severe the problem is.

Decision Making Processes

Force Field Analysis



2. Posting your schedule + discussing this with your peers can help eliminate up to 80% of the interruptions that you actually can avoid.

3. Use an understood signal to limit interruptions

4. If several people in your library are having problems with drop-in visitors, agree on a signal that says "Please don't interrupt unless it's an emergency."

The Open Door Policy

A director I worked with had an "open-door" policy. He wanted his employees to feel comfortable talking to him about anything, anytime. Unfortunately, he rarely found time to get his work done.

So at his next staff meeting, he explained the problem. He announced that when he had a deadline, he would put on his red baseball cap. His door would remain open in case there was an emergency, but he would prefer that employees not interrupt him during those times. According to this manager, wearing the red cap worked like a charm.

Get together with your department and agree on a signal that everyone will use consistently. Wearing orange armbands?
Partially closing the door?

Of course, if you use a signal, make sure that you don't abuse it. One group I know of reported that coworkers respected the signal about 80% of the time. When I questioned those involved about the times when the signal wasn't respected, it turned out that some people never took down their signals. They were never available to their coworkers, so their coworkers simply ignored their signals.

5. Establish conditional interruptions

For example:

Type 1 issues require your input specifically. The library world will stop until you are available to discuss them. Condition your employees to interrupt you only for this type of issue.

Type 2 issues need only a quick yes-or-no answer and require just a little interaction. Have your employees save these issues and check in with you once a day for five things instead of imposing five interruptions for one thing each time.

Type 3 issues can be answered by someone else; you're not the only person in the world who can help. Kindly request that people look elsewhere for answers to Type 3 issues. Avoid saying that it's not your job; instead educate the visitor on the appropriate resource.

Type 4 issues are already answered in print somewhere — such as in a procedure, guide, or employee manual — and don't require your assistance. People ask this type of question when they're being lazy. Tell your coworkers clearly, "Please don't bother me with Type 4 issues."

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OK...I'm brave enough to ask...Are YOU the cause of your own interruptions?

A) Are you using interruptions as an excuse to avoid your work? Once you have been interrupted, it can be very tempting to use this as an excuse stop what you are doing. Note down a reminder of where you were before your interruption, and make sure that you get back to it straight afterwards.

B) Do you start one project before completing the first? How would it feel if you just completed just ONE thing before starting another? Leaving work “Incomplete” drains your energy, while completing work does take more time initially, it will save you time in the long run.

C) Do you procrastinate? Stop procrastinating and Take Action - do it NOW!

D) Are you distracted? Turn off the radio, close the blind if the outside world is distracting you, and face your desk away from the door.

For Managers to Consider

The manager's time at work can be divided into four categories: time for superiors, time for organizing things, time for co-workers, and time for oneself. A manager can maximize time by planning what is to be accomplished and when it will be done. By keeping an accurate record of where time is spent in any given week, the manager can assess whether or not it is spent on the proper tasks. Some tips for managing time are: anticipating and planning for crises, concentrating on high priority items, not spending time making decisions for subordinates, and making sure some time is put aside for relaxing.

Other Interrupters to Consider

Set Yourself up for Success

Examine how your office is situated. If you face the door, you might be tempted to look up each time you see someone go by, or people might be tempted to stop in and chat with you.

Move your desk so you don't face the door. Also, keep your area neat and organized so you can find what you need when you need it, rather than stopping your work to find a lost file or e-mail.

Don't Worry About Hurt Feelings

It's OK to tell someone you would like to hear about his vacation but you just don't have the time now. You are allowed to say "not now" when an

officemate wants to chat. If a co-worker asks you to do something because it's easier than him learning how to do it on his own, there is nothing wrong with declining.

Stop Before They Start

When a colleague interrupts you, stop her before she gets too far into her issue, and ask how long it will take. Then you can decide if you will deal with it now or later.

Define "Emergency"

When a co-worker comes to you with an urgent issue, ask if it needs to be taken care of immediately or if it can wait. If it's an emergency, determine whom it's an emergency for. For example, if an associate wants to turn in a project early to impress her supervisor it might be an emergency for her, but it's not for you.

Are You the Best Choice?

Find out if the person asking for help really needs you or just needs someone. Ask questions to determine if he is asking you simply because you are most likely to say yes. If so, suggest someone who can handle it, or better yet, offer suggestions of how he can do it himself.

Stand Up

Get out of your chair when someone comes to your office unexpectedly. That way, she doesn't sit down and become too comfortable and overstay her welcome. When you are ready to end the meeting, you can edge back toward the door and escort her out.

Keep a Log

Keep a record of when your interruptions occur. Include the time of day; how long it lasted; who brought it to you; why she came to you, and if you benefited from the encounter.

After a few days, review the log and look for patterns and address them. For example, if the same employee comes by consistently, find out why. Does she need more assignments? If so, maybe you could delegate some responsibilities to her. Is she looking for recognition? If so, maybe you need to provide more unsolicited feedback so she won't feel the need to come by as often.

Follow these tips to limit interruptions and disruptions and make the most of your workday. Be honest. Explain that you have deadlines to meet and that you want to make the most of your office time so you can complete your tasks and enjoy your free time with a clear conscience.

It might be hard at first, but be disciplined and consistent and your colleagues will catch on and respect your wishes.

Internet - Be careful about being drawn in by the Internet. Doing some research on the net can lead to distractions like shopping or looking at interesting sites that are unrelated to your current project. The Internet can be a huge interruption while at the same time a necessity.

Other projects - Sometimes when you are working on one project something you need to do on another pops into your head. Getting up to do the other can be a way of procrastinating. If you don't want to work on the project at hand something else that really does have to be done can be enticing. An example for me would be when I am working on a project and suddenly realize my plants need watering. Watering the plants at that moment is a big interruption. A way to deal with it is to make a note in my calendar to do it at another time.

Idea Flash - Funny how you can pause to think about something you are working on and suddenly you get a great idea about something else. If you have an idea notebook write it down and move on. No special notebook? Write it down somewhere so you can come back to it once you finish.

Messy office - A messy office can drain you of energy. Make sure the place you are working is relatively clear of unessential materials before you start working. Schedule a cleaning time on your calendar.

Hunger, need cigarette, bathroom - Take care of these needs before you begin your work. Any one of these can use up a whole morning because you pass other team members on your way to get food, a cigarette or to use the facilities and that can lead to conversation and distractions.

Final Thought!

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Remember that no one can interrupt you without some permission on your part. Think about that. The idea is to take control, be pro-active and pre-empt those interruptions ahead of time! Stop regarding your personal time as an endless source of "make-up" time or you will end up without much of a life!

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