



CubeSmart, Inc.

Social Interruption and the Loss of Productivity

Introduction:

Time is the great equalizer. The hours in a day are something we all share, and lose, at the same rate. As time is our most finite resource, interruptions in the work place can cause a decelerating effect on our workload. In a professional work environment, productivity can be measured by momentum. Much like your automobile has to work harder to accelerate from a complete stop so does your work. Although interruptions are part of our normal work life, limiting social interruptions is often crucial in breaking free of the inevitable backlog cycle and delivery "slippage".

What is needed is a cost-effective, portable psychological barrier to signal that the user requires a period of uninterrupted work. CubeSmart® CubeDoor™ and CubeBanner™ offers an immediate defense against unwanted social interruptions, while maintaining a consistent look throughout the office environment.

Interruptions at Work

The average office worker is interrupted seventy-three times every day. And the average manager is interrupted every eight minutes¹. Interruptions include telephone calls, incoming email messages, interruptions by colleagues, and crises. And, once there is an interruption, statistics tell us that it takes 20 minutes to get back to the level of concentration that we were at prior to the disruption. We can easily spend our entire day on interruptions and crises and get nothing done that we planned to accomplish. Of course, we cannot — and would not want to — eliminate all interruptions, but we can reduce them and take control of our time more effectively.

Most managers acknowledge that social conversation in the workplace is natural and, in fact, desirable in fostering stronger ties among employees and fostering better teamwork throughout the company. And, let's face it — sometimes it is just nice to take an unscheduled break.

Good & Bad

An interruption is nothing more than an unanticipated event. It appears in one of two forms, either in-person or over a communications medium (email, phone, beepers, pagers, faxes, etc.) Gone are the days when stepping away from your workspace eliminated a majority of your interruptions. With cell phones, wireless PDA's and "anywhere-email", it's hard to avoid these continuous interruptions.

Like everything we encounter, interruptions are both good and bad. A lot of professionals do on a daily basis is to address the "good" interruptions, those that are crucial and important. Actually, much of the perceived value as professionals is determined by how they handle those "good" interruptions. Those are not the concern. What takes away from achieving higher levels of productivity are the "bad" interruptions, those that have little or no value.

On average, we experience one interruption every 8 minutes or approximately 6-7 per hour. In an 8-hour day, that totals around 50-60 interruptions in the day. The average interruption takes approximately 5 minutes. If you are receiving 50 interruptions in the day and each takes 5 minutes, that totals 250 minutes, or just over 4 hours out of 8, or about 50% of the workday.

¹ *Dr. Richard Swenson, 1992*

Now, if you were to track and rate each interruption we experience during the day, (let "A" = Crucial; "B" = Important; "C" = Little Value; and "D" = "No Value"), most people will discover that only about 20% of their interruptions are of the "A" and "B" variety and 80% are of the "C" and "D" variety.

Finally, if you experience 250 minutes of interruptions in your day and 80% are of the "C" and "D" variety, having little or no value, that equates to 3 hours and 20 minutes per day consumed by interruptions that are not worthy of your time.

Recovery Time

Interruptions at work are unavoidable. Cognitive studies on interruptions show that an interruption requires immediate attention and action and most of us allow and even encourage interruptions to take place and to take precedence over other tasks. We often respond quickly to these interruptions, as it gives us a feeling of closure, knowing we may not have to address this issue in the immediate future.

The consequence of an interruption depends on the original task's complexity. If the task we were doing before the interruption is complex, it is likely the interrupt will cause loss in concentration and time. An interruption can also have a "downstream" effect, actually impacting the workflow of multiple persons.

The *Interruption process model*, developed by Franck Tétard, illustrates the process we use to handle an interruption. Dr. Tétard has made an extensive survey of working environments, and has developed the Theory of the Fragmentation of Working Time (FWT).

The remainder of this article has been paraphrased from articles of:

Franck Tétard

Institute for Advanced Management Systems Research
Turku Centre for Computer Science
Lemminkäinenkatu 14
20520 TURKU – FINLAND

Additional reading of Mr. Tétard's work can be found here:

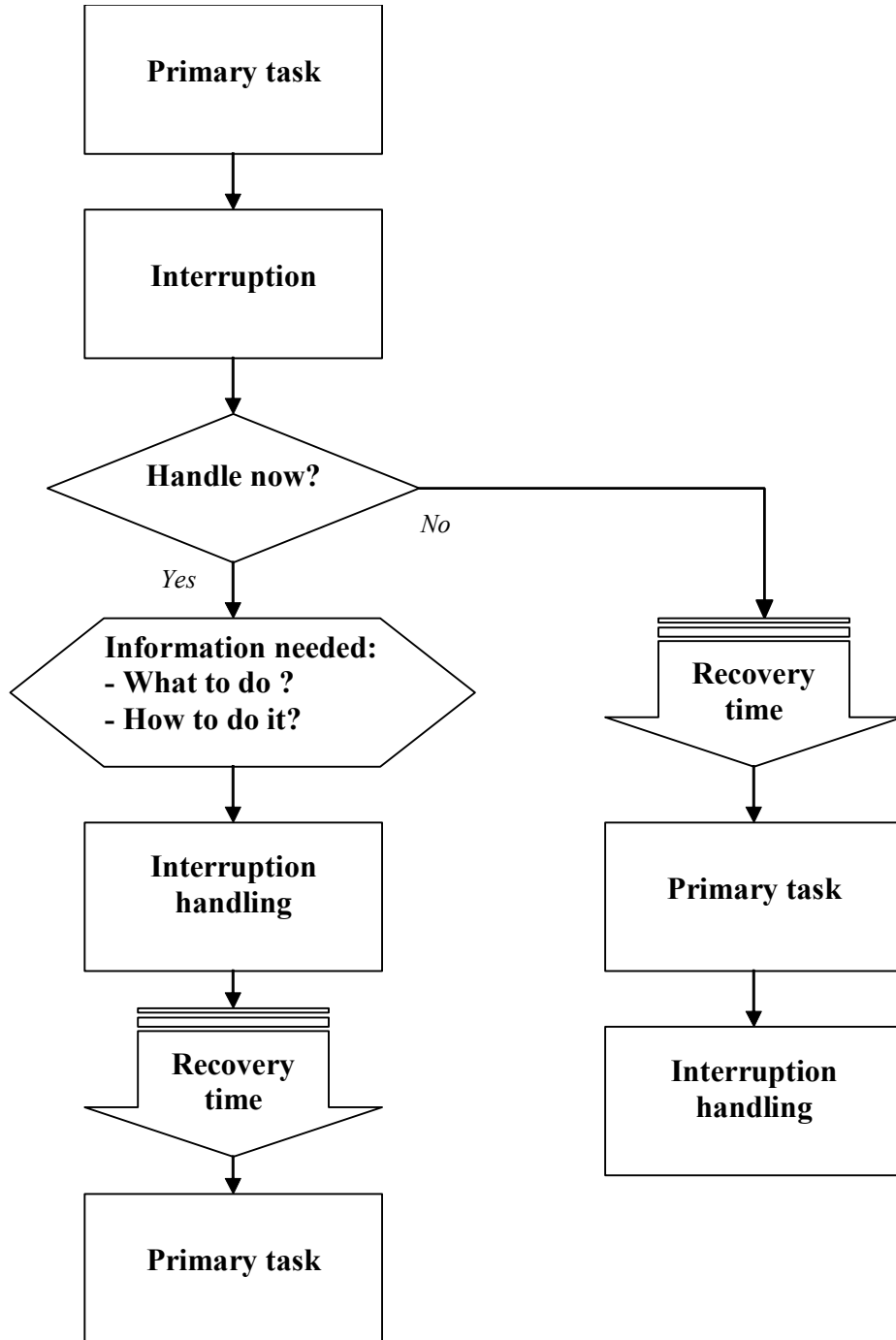
[Modern Information Technology to Support Interrupted Work Environments](#)

European Conference on Information Systems, Copenhagen,
Denmark, 23-25 June 1999

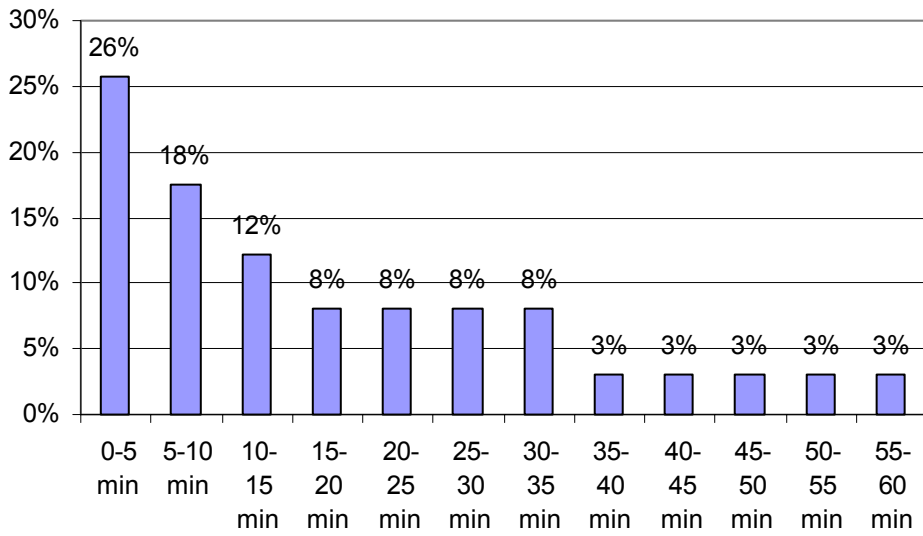
[Fragmentation of Working Time and Smarter IS-Solutions](#)

33rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences - 2000

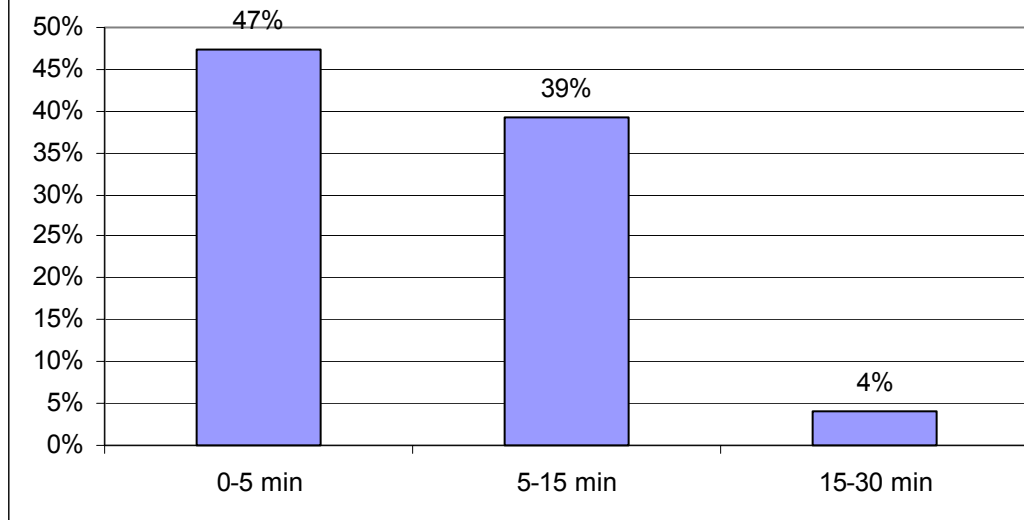
Interruption process model

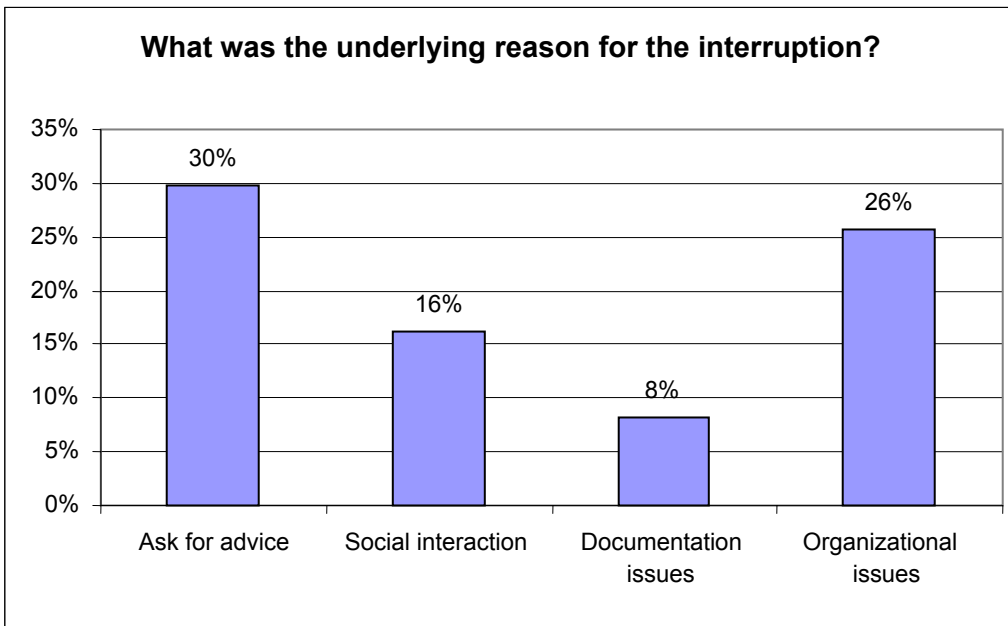
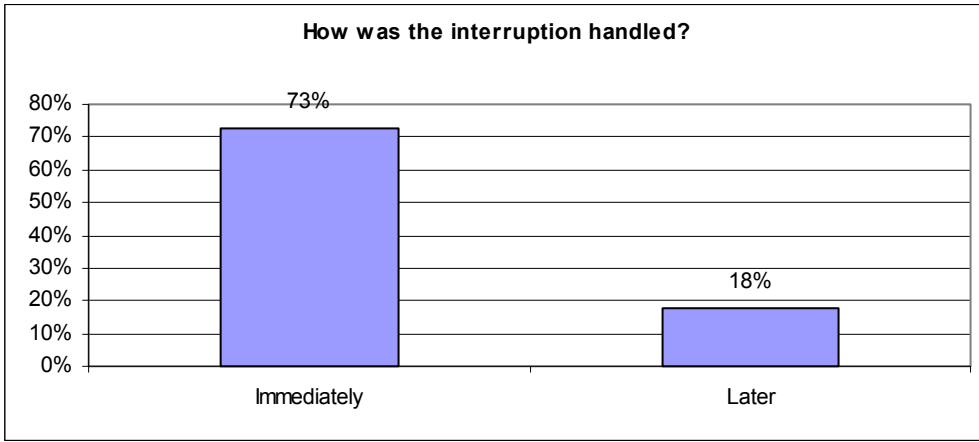


What was the workload of the interruption ?



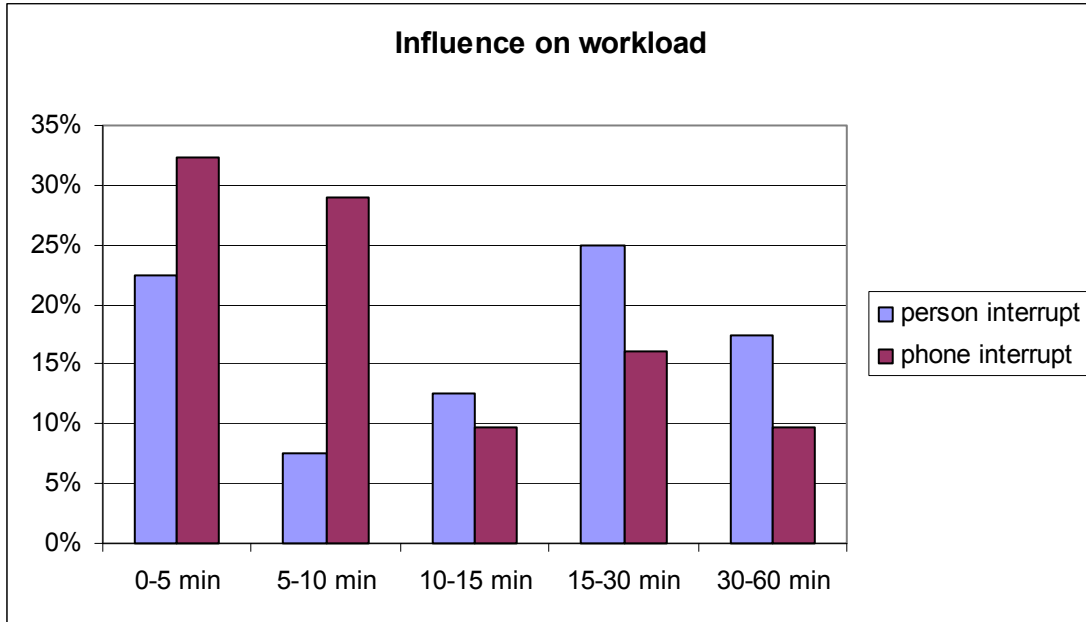
What was the recovery time after the interruption ?





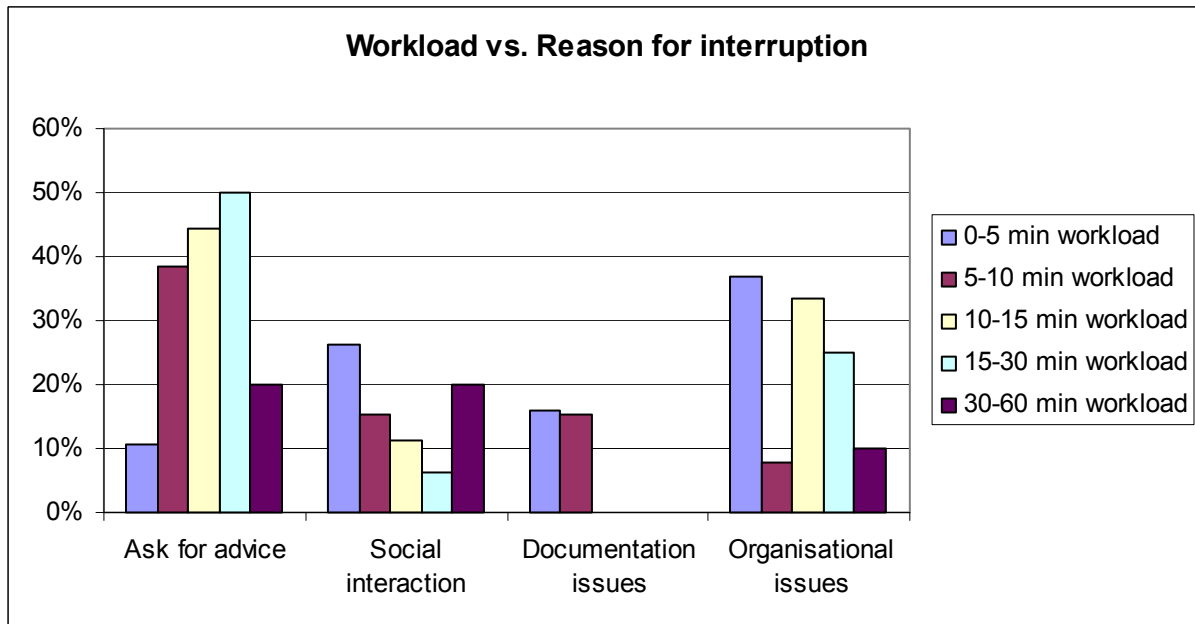
The medium influences the workload of the interruptions:

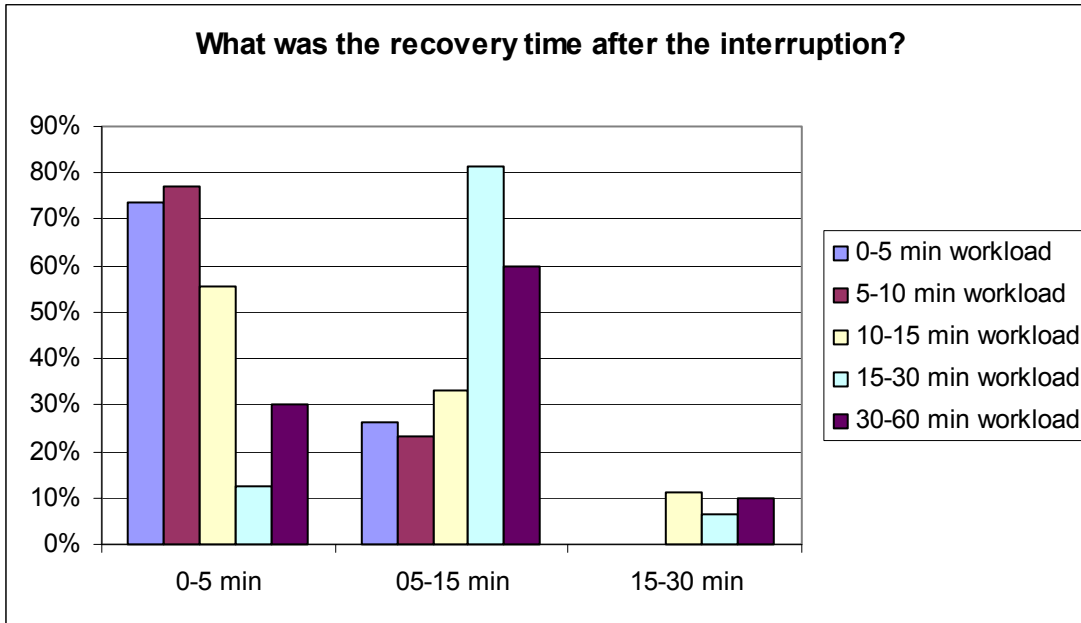
- Phone interruptions generate a short workload,
- In person interruptions generate a long workload.



The duration of the workload influences the duration of the recovery time:

- Short workload generates low recovery time
- Long workload generates long recovery time





Conclusion

Social interruption has the highest impact on our ability to return to our original task. We are often placed in a position of being overtly rude or enduring the added stress of missed deadlines (even if self-imposed) caused by well-meaning “cubicle intruders”.

Until we can politely and effectively reduce these interruptions, we will continue to be at the mercy of an unforgiving clock.

What is needed is a cost-effective, portable ‘psychological’ barrier to signal that the user requires a period of uninterrupted work. CubeSmart® CubeDoor™ and CubeBanner™ offers an immediate defense against unwanted social interruptions, while maintaining a consistent look throughout the office environment.