

Little Disruptions Can Steal Away Whole Day

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What is your typical day like? Maybe it goes something like this...You begin working on email at 8:00AM. Suddenly, it seems, it's 9:30AM. and you are rushing to get to that 10AM meeting. Because the client is late and there is too much to discuss, you don't get out of the meeting until 12PM. You then grab a sandwich and get back to the office, check email and voice mail, and return messages. The time is now 2PM. Your colleague, Sally, comes in to report that there has been a disaster with a client. You leave everything for an emergency meeting to deal with the crisis. At 3PM you settle in to begin work on your "to do" list, but your colleague John comes by — he is SO funny and he has a great story to share with you about his weekend. You glance at your watch and it is 3:30PM — you better check email again. At 4PM you look at your list and at the papers on your desk, and begin doing those small things that can get done quickly. At 5PM you race out of the office to get your kids. You feel exhausted and are not very sure of what you accomplished that day. Does this feel like your day?

Well, you are in good company. Did you know that the average American is interrupted seventy-three times every day? And the average manager is interrupted every eight minutes. (Margin, Dr. Richard Swenson, 1992). 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. Here are some suggestions to begin.

Plan Uninterrupted Time Daily

Plan at least one to two hours a day of uninterrupted work time. "How can I possibly do that?" most people protest, when they hear this suggestion. It does take planning and diligence to create uninterrupted time for yourself, but it is worth the effort. To begin, block out the time in your calendar. This will serve as a visual reminder that that space in the day is yours. Then, come up with a visual clue for your colleagues — such as a door sign, a symbol on your cubicle, or a crazy hat you wear only during that time — that signifies that this is your uninterrupted time. Make sure to communicate clearly what the signal means, and, at first, you may have to remind yourself of it's meaning, as well. If your colleague John comes by with another great story, you cannot selectively stop your work to listen to him. If you do, you cannot expect that your other colleagues will adhere to your signal either.

Minimize Telephone Interruptions

Have your phone calls go to voicemail during your uninterrupted time. Have your voicemail message articulate clearly the best times to reach you by phone and be sure to include your email address in your message as an alternative way to reach you. Colleagues and customers often express themselves more clearly in email, which in turn allows you to more effectively respond to them — and, to do so in a timely manner. When speaking on the phone, you can politely and professionally establish a time limit when necessary. For example, you can say, "Joe, I've only got 5 minutes, but I definitely wanted to get you the information that you called about."

Deal More Efficiently with Email

Avoid looking at email messages more than 2 to 3 times daily. Turn off the audio "ding" on your computer that signals the arrival of new email. Tackle your email messages at designated times. Scanning messages and responding to them "later," at an undetermined time generally results in an ever-growing inbox.

Deterring Social Interruptions

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. If you want to concentrate on work; however, and your designated "uninterrupted time signal" is not working well, here are some additional suggestions for minimizing in-person social interruptions.

1. Put your briefcase or bag in the empty chair near your desk. This reinforces the idea that you are unavailable momentarily to talk — and certainly discourages anyone from sitting down and "getting comfortable!"
2. Stand up when someone enters your office and that person will be less inclined to sit down and more inclined to communicate directly.
3. Make scheduled appointments for employees who need your guidance. You will be better able to listen and they will have time to organize their thoughts.
4. When interrupted, ask yourself, "Is this interruption a priority?" If it is not, and you would like to encourage the communication, simply say, "I'd love to hear about it, let me finish what I'm doing and then I'll get right back to you." Alternatively, you can respond to an interruption with the following questions, "Is this a priority for you right now? Could we discuss it later?"

If you do find yourself interrupted in the middle of a task, write a quick reminder to yourself about where and on what you were working. If the interruption is significant, insert this note in your (paper or electronic) day planner — or even taped to your desk — so you will not forget to complete the task.

Goethe once said, "Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least." Minimize interruptions during the workday, so that you can concentrate your time on the most important projects and action items to be accomplished.

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