

Interruptions

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If you have never interrupted anyone, please raise your hand. Even though I can't see you, I am confident that there are no hands being raised. We all interrupt, even though most academic folks would say that interruptions are one of the most productivity-robbing events they face. Let's start our analysis of how to deal with interruptions by considering them from the point of view of the interrupter, then the interrupted.

Think about the reasons you choose to interrupt others. I'm guessing that these include: You believe the matter is critically important to the other person, or, to you; you are under a deadline, and need the other person's input; you just want to get something done, and interrupting is the quickest way to get the information you need; and occasionally you may just feel in the mood to chat. Perhaps you try to avoid interrupting, but when the door to the office of the person you need something from is open, it seems all right to do it.

Now think of the reasons why you don't like being interrupted: The interruption breaks your concentration, and you either forget what you are doing, or you make extra mistakes; you are under deadline, and the interruptions eats up precious time; the interruption was really not urgent for either you or the interrupter; or the interruption is a social interaction that occurs too often, or goes on too long. Sometimes, however, the biggest problem with an interruption is the emotional reactions it engenders. You are annoyed, irritated, furious—and recovering from that state takes time.

I hope you can see that interruptions are a complex business, and one or two "tricks" will not address the problem. Before we talk about different types, and some ways to deal with each, here are three underlying assumptions: (1) Most interruptions are just new work coming to you at a time you didn't plan. You need to figure out a way to minimize distraction, but still get the work; (2) most of your work can be successfully done in and among interruptions; long stretches of uninterrupted time are needed only for certain kinds of work; and (3) unless you are the only transplant surgeon—or family doctor—in town, you don't need to make yourself available 24/7/365.

The Interruption Log

If interruptions are a major problem, consider keeping an interruption log for a day or two. Simply keep a running list of the time, person, and reason for the interruption for the day. Later, you can analyze each into the categories below, and figure out which strategies you need to work on first.

Interruption by E-mail

E-mail can be a bigger source of interruptions these days than people are, but luckily, you have control over the solutions to this problem. First, automatic notification of incoming e-mails (by a sound, or change in cursor, or pop-up box) should be turned off. Consult the help section of your e-mail program, or ask your local IT person for instructions. Second, except when you are working on e-mail, do not have the inbox open on your screen. Better choices are your calendar, your task list ((if it is electronic), a picture of your family or pets—or turn off the screen.

Insidious (“intended to entrap”) describes the approach most of us use: looking at e-mail first thing in the morning. Have you ever found yourself looking up at the clock and realizing that you are still “doing” e-mail three hours later? Instead, start the day by finishing one important task, and only then look at your e-mail. You will feel productive from completing the task, and the addictive quality of e-mail will diminish. Finally, do e-mail in short batches throughout the day, and don’t look at it in between. Set a timer, and stop when the bell rings.

Interruption by Important, but Non-Urgent, Matters

The goal with these interruptions is to minimize them by making agreements with the people you work with to contact you in noninterrupting ways. Set up regular meetings with support staff, lab members, writing collaborators, and others. Agree that any items that aren’t urgent will be brought to this meeting, and arrange the frequency to match the need—for example, daily with a secretary, and weekly with the lab group. Set a regular time for taking calls from these people for the things that can’t wait for the regular meeting.

Ask your colleagues to send you e-mails instead of dropping by, and then follow through by getting through all your e-mail every day. Productivity expert David Allen and his wife e-mail each other with all family “business” matters—even if the two are working side by side in the same room—and save time together for leisure and other activities. Finally, remember that these interruptions are just “more work,” and try to eliminate the negative emotions that they raise.

Interruption by Important, Urgent Matters

The most important step in dealing with this type of interruption is determining if it really is urgent. Assess it and then decide what to do. The trickiest part is to stop any rising negative emotion in its tracks so you can focus all your energy on the work.

Then, before you move to take action on the thing that interrupted you, make a note of what you will do next when you come back to the job that was interrupted. Put that work in the center of your desk, or the top of your “pending work” tray so that it does not leave your mind.

Do the other things. Then reassess the priorities. If appropriate, go back to the previously interrupted work.

Interruption by Unimportant, Non-Urgent Matters

Casual conversation is the most common example of this category. Good social interactions with colleague and staff are critical to your success and happiness in the workplace. The trick is to avoid spending an inappropriate amount of time at this activity. Most of us instinctively know when a conversation is too long—but not everyone does. Your challenge is to know how to elegantly cut the conversation short, without damaging the relationship. “Tricks” that may help are to stand and meet the person at your doorway—usually this shortens the conversation—or, offer to stop by the other person’s office later—you can then control your departure more easily.

An Algorithm

When you are interrupted by someone else, you don’t have any way of knowing immediately to which category the interruption should be assigned. Here is an approach:

- Describe your current availability in a friendly, but clear way.
- Ask what you are being asked to do.
- Assess the urgency and importance—this will usually be obvious if you listen to your internal voice.
- Decide whether to stop and deal with the issue now, or tell the person when he or she can expect you to do so.

An example:

Tom: “Bob, I need to talk to you right away.”

You: “Tom, my dictation for today’s clinic needs to be finished in an hour, so I have less than five minutes available right now. What do you need—is five minutes enough time?”

Tom: “I need your input on one part of my personal statement for promotion—it will probably take 15 minutes.”

You: “Great—let’s find a time later this afternoon to get together.”

Interruption by Yourself

You probably interrupt yourself dozens, or even hundreds, of times a day. As you are working on your R01 application, you remember that you need to pick up milk on the way home from work tonight, or a great idea for the second R01 pops up. You are performing a focused literature search on migraine headache, the topic of your upcoming lecture, but when an article in the search results on chronic hypertension

piques your interest, you click on that instead. You have made a short, prioritized list of tasks for the day, but someone pops by your office with a simple, quick, but not urgent, task and you go do that instead. Or you are distracted by anxiety, or feeling overwhelmed, or some other emotional state.

As always, recognition of what is going on is the first step. Keep a pad next to your current work, and write down any idea or “to-do” that comes up; then go back to your work. Ask yourself “Is this the best/most important thing for me to be doing at this moment?” before you pick any “to-do.” Be aware of your emotions, and if they are bothersome, take a moment to breathe and settle down.

When You Really Need Uninterrupted Time

The culture of most of the academic institutions I know encourages constant availability, and many academics have an internal need to be available regardless of the culture. It does not need to be that way. With very few exceptions, most of us can seclude ourselves for some time nearly every day. The straightforward method is to close the door and put your phone on voice mail. If that makes you feel nervous, use one or more of these tips and tricks.

Tell your colleagues and other employees that you are going to be doing this, and state the conditions under which they are free to interrupt. Put a sign on your door, with a note about when you will be available again. Put a meeting appointment on your calendar with “Dr. M.S.” (My Self) so that your secretary and other think someone else is with you. If staying in your office seems untenable, find another place you can go to work: a nearby coffee shop, the library, an empty office, and so on.

If your job really requires that you be constantly “on” when you are at work, you may need to find this time before or after official hours. The bad news is that too much working outside of regular work hours can be bad for you. The good news is that even one hour of uninterrupted time per day can vastly increase your productivity.

Resources

Allen D. Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity. New York: Viking, 2001.

BlueCross BlueShield Interruptions Assessment Quiz. Access at:
<http://carefirst.staywellsolutionsonline.com/interactivetools/quizzes/40,InterruptionsWorkplaQuiz>.

Perlmutter DD. Do you really not have the time? Chronicle of Higher Education, August 22, 2008, accessed at <http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/08/2008082201c.htm> on 08/22/2008