

Disrupt the Interrupters!

Compiled by Tim McClintock, Global Knowledge Instructor

"Interruptions are the most stressful aspect of many people's jobs . . . even more than firing or reprimanding"

- from a survey by American Management Society

In a previous article titled *12 Steps to Managing Your Time So You Can Have Personal Time*, we looked at several ways to improve the management of time and priorities. One of the areas mentioned the need to effectively deal with various types of interruptions. In this article, we will explore this topic in greater detail.

Managing Interruptions

The productive day is only five hours long, and interruptions can quickly cut this time in half. But the interruption itself is only part of the equation; there is at least one additional element at play in these situations: recovery time!

Consider: the average interruption lasts 6-9 minutes, the average recovery time for each is 3-23 minutes, which means the typical interruption has at least a 20 minute overall effect! The bottom line is three interruptions per hour and **nothing gets done!**

Translate this into lower productivity, loss of efficiency, higher costs, pushed-out timelines, increased risk, lower quality, and the list could go on and on! Can you say **ADDED STRESS?**

Efficient time management requires that interruptions be strictly controlled. Although interruptions are cited by many people as the most stressful aspect of their job, it does not have to be that way.

Disrupt the Interrupters

A saying that can put many of the interruptions you encounter into perspective when managing your time is, "A lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on mine."

Reducing Interruptions

Use the following techniques to reduce the number of interruptions you encounter in your busy day:

- Screen your calls, close your door, or work away from your office to avoid interruptions.
- Let people know you are too busy when you are in a time crunch, and ask if you can do it later. Even your boss. They might just understand! Try it!
- When people come into your area, stand up to discourage them from sitting down and getting comfortable, and they will conclude their business faster.
- If you have already been interrupted, look repeatedly at your watch to subtly show you need to move on to other tasks.
- Use the telephone instead of face-to-face meetings to keep them shorter.
- Don't let the telephone or e-mail interrupt you; get to them when you are ready for them.

Dealing with the Telephone

The telephone can be a huge distraction since most of us tend to grab the phone as soon as it rings. Just because the office or cell phone rings or your pager beeps does not make it your immediate priority. Use the following suggestions to deal with telephone calls:

- Use Caller ID! Then, when appropriate, don't pick up the phone if it is an interruption to what you are doing; use your voice mail to take a message. The phone is a tool for YOU to use!
- Leave a detailed message on your voice mail that includes the date and tells callers when you will check your voice mail.
- Let people know in your voice message if you are unreachable, so they know when to expect to hear from you (in a meeting for the morning or out of the office all day).
- Don't pick up the phone if it is an interruption to what you are doing; use your voice mail to take a message.
- Call forward your calls to voice mail or to your assistant.
- Use e-mail instead of picking up the phone for simpler matters.
- Return calls just before lunch or at the end of the day, so people will not talk as long.
- If you need to reach someone in a different time zone, make sure to leave a detailed message of what the call was about and when you can be reached.
- Sometimes it is better to call someone when you know they will be away from the phone, and leave a voice message to avoid wasting time chatting.

- Make sure to listen to, and clear out, your voice mail, so the voice mail box will never be full.
- To end a call, just say your other line is ringing and you have to run.
- Pagers can be turned off if the people who expect to find you know where you are, in the event of a real emergency.
- Self-Imposed Interruptions.

Many interruptions are self-imposed. Your productivity can be greatly increased by making sure you are not your own worst enemy.

- Don't create distracting noise and don't let noise distract you. Turn off the radio. Drown out distracting noise with white noise such as a fan or motor. Try ear-defenders.
- Make sure everything you need is on hand before you start. Having to run around to collect things you should have had before getting down to work is a self-imposed interruption.
- Announce your quiet times. If you plan it properly, you can make yourself unavailable for a few hours a day. Make sure others know when your quiet times are, and make sure they take these times seriously.
- **Check voice and e-mail only twice a day, three times at the most.** Constantly checking them is a waste of time and a pointless distraction. I know, I know . . . It WILL hurt at first; probably a lot! But you CAN do it!
- Get off of circulation lists for unnecessary information, or even significant information that you cannot hope to absorb. Prevent documents from reaching you by letting others know what is important to you. If unwanted documentation or mail arrives, remind the senders, time and again, that you do not wish to receive it any more.

Interruptions by Others

Being asked an excess of questions is disruptive to your productivity. Everyone needs productive quiet time - claim yours.

- Encourage staff to use other resources for answers. Let everyone know who in the department is a good source of answers. The more practice others get at this, the better they will be.
- When delegating tasks, use outlines to make sure that as many questions as possible are answered at the outset. Organize their assignments and your role in them so that there are very few questions and more than one source of answers. Include an escalation path that starts with someone other than you.
- If the same questions are being asked again and again, type them out, with answers, and post them on your door. Make them clearly visible when the door is closed. The hint does not need to be subtle.
- If it seems that all you do is answer questions to keep people moving, then give multiple assignments. If one task is blocked for want of an answer, they can move on to the next. This way multiple questions can be answered all at

once (when you are available), rather than in bits and pieces throughout the day. Everyone will be more productive.

- Those people who cannot work independently and who are always asking questions should be given simple assignments that take a long time. Keep them busy so you can be productive. But also consider training programs for these people - the better your staff, the easier it is for you to get things done.
- Help mediocre employees become good employees by making them more and more capable of accepting complex tasks. Everyone will benefit from their increased responsibility.

But remember - It cannot be quiet all the time. There must be times when you are freely available, either to set an appointment or for people to drop in. Let everyone know when these times are. Walk around and catch up with everyone who might have questions for you. Make it clear when you are available and when you are not.

About the Author

Tim McClintock, PMP is a Senior Instructor and course director with Global Knowledge. He has over 20 years of experience in Fortune 500 Companies in the IT, banking, and service sectors, and has consulted with organizations such as Nortel, Cisco, SBC, Verizon, CitiGroup, Exxon Mobil, NSA, DISA, Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, Schlumberger, and the United States Military. He provides management and technical consulting and training to all levels of professionals in both established businesses and new business ventures.

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