Workplace Interruptions
Interruption overload—How to minimize distractions at work

We’re all living in a disruption society. Hundreds if not thousands of new e-mail messages hit our inbox every day. Social media notifications pop up around the clock. With all of these daily distractions, how is a professional supposed to stay focused? And to an even greater degree, as a leader how do you help your team minimize distraction to maintain productivity and produce innovative ideas?

Companies looking to stay relevant need laser-focused leaders who are free from distraction and have clear vision, inspiration for innovative new approaches and an environment that fosters teamwork. This Blue Paper® will explore our disruptive culture and provide tools for instilling clarity and calm to your team. We may not be able to escape interruption, but we can learn to manage it!

Our disruptive culture

Interruptions have always been a part of life—both personally and professionally. Even during the 1800s, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche recognized the effects of interruptions and distractions, writing “[we] … seek out distractions in order to stay mentally busy so we can avoid facing up to the big questions.”

Interruptions in the workplace may differ from those “big questions” we face in our personal lives, but broadly defined, interruptions are any occurrences that delay us as we attempt to make progress on tasks. They can be categorized as external annoyances and internal, or self-distractions. An external annoyance could be a loud coworker talking just outside your office, and an internal distraction could be your urge to check social media every hour (and, thus, to avoid making progress on a new project).

Technology has increased the opportunity for interruption in workplaces because social and mobile technologies have changed the way employees create, share and communicate.

Social media networks have become important communication mediums, as well as integral parts of business and marketing strategies. The use of social media networks among American adult Internet users is highlighted in figure 1.

4 Duggan, Maeve, Nicole Ellison, Cliff Lampe, Amanda Lenhart, and Mary Madden. Social Media Update 2014.
Expanding social media platforms increases the opportunity for interruption and distraction among workers, especially since each platform fights for its users’ attention.6

While older than social media networks, e-mail remains an important—albeit often distracting—aspect of the American workplace. It’s estimated that U.S. workers spend an average of 3.2 hours a day devoted to checking and responding to work-related e-mails.7 Even with the growth of social media and workplaces trying to explore communication and productivity tools aside from e-mail, Kristin Naragon of Adobe® Systems Inc. says, “Email is and will remain a cornerstone of the workplace culture.” Not only does e-mail take up a significant amount of employees’ work hours, but switching tasks, which often occurs when e-mail notifications interrupt focus on other tasks, reduces efficiency and can even lower intelligence.8

The opportunity for workplace interruption isn’t greater merely because of networks, but because of the technologies that allow us to view those networks’ notifications, messages and correspondence at any time. By early 2015, nearly two-thirds of Americans owned a smartphone, with Americans of all ages citing text messaging, social networking, using the Internet, making phone calls and

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5 Ibid
checking e-mails as the top features and uses of their smartphones.\(^9\) Smartphones, as well as other mobile technology such as laptops and tablets, allow us to have most, if not all, of our communications at our fingertips. From responding to e-mail and social network notifications to browsing the Internet to making phone calls, technology allows us to be reached—and interrupted—24/7. Mobile and social technology, coupled with more traditional forms of workplace interruptions, make you and your team prone to workplace distraction. Before delving into practical ways for you and your team to adapt to and manage increasing workplace interruptions, leaders must understand the pros and cons associated with such distraction.

**The pros and cons of interrupted work**

Interruptions can, perhaps surprisingly, offer benefits to you and your organization. If an employee is completing a task incorrectly, interruption is a means to intervene, and in work situations where tasks are repetitive or viewed as mundane, interruptions may even increase productivity.\(^10\) Organizations and individuals who find ways to control interruptions and distractions may find them more beneficial than those often associated with a lack of control or plans. Despite some potential benefits, interruptions are often viewed negatively—for good reason. Focus is the key driver of employees’ creativity and innovation, leading to increased work effectiveness, performance and satisfaction. Yet, interruptions lead to a loss of focus.\(^11\) Gloria Mark, a University of California, Irvine, professor who studies digital distraction, notes that studies show employees only have an average of three minutes of consistent focus before they are externally distracted or self-interrupted.\(^12\) These seemingly constant interruptions and subsequent lack of focus negatively affect you, your team and ultimately, your organization. “Interruptions that are unpredictable and cannot be controlled result in more stress and affect task performance,” Mark says. Digital media, such as instant messaging or e-mail, cause greater distraction and stress than face-to-face interruptions.

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Leaders who are number-crunchers and determine actions merely based on the bottom-line may be interested to note that businesses lose more than $650 billion annually in productivity and innovation because of interruptions. Interruptions cost money—a significant amount every year. While interruptions may offer occasional benefits to you, your team and your organization, they often negatively affect employees and organizations. With expanding communication mediums and advancing technologies, learning how to adapt and manage such interruptions may improve the health of your team and your organization.

**Disrupt growing disruption: Strategies to get the job done**

While self-awareness is essential in helping individual employees manage workplace interruptions, organizational culture and policies play an important role in minimizing these growing disruptions.

Marty Martin, author of “Taming Disruptive Behavior,” says some disruptions can be not only minimized, but potentially eliminated from the workplace, if managers help their employees assess and address them. Managers can help employees make a personalized plan to address disruptions, which may tackle disruptions ranging from a noisy cubicle location to a reevaluation of how an entire workplace uses e-mail. Increasing focus and productivity through minimizing distractions should be an employer and employee effort.

Here are some ways you, your team and your organization can foster a focused, minimally disruptive work environment.

**Manage time and space**

Instead of responding to an e-mail or phone call each time you receive a new one, batch your communications by scheduling a few times during your work day to respond to e-mails and return phone calls.

Brian Tracy, a thought leader on personal and business development, explains in his book, “Time Management,” “Batching your tasks simply means doing similar things at the same time ... [and] allows you to reduce the time required to complete each task by as much as 80 percent.”

Your industry, position, organization and other work tasks will help determine

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how often you should schedule time to respond to e-mail and phone calls, but as Tracy suggests, you’re losing momentum, clarity and productivity in more important tasks when you are “slave” to your e-mail and phone. With expanding social media platforms, a similar approach should be taken for your social media accounts.

Aside from e-mails, phone calls and social media, workplace interruptions can also occur through face-to-face communication. You may be writing a conference report when a coworker stops by your office to chat. Or, you were deep in research for a new client proposal when your supervisor comes to your cubicle to let you know he wants to see you in his office right away. Schedule “power hours,” or time devoted to making progress on your most important tasks, by making yourself less accessible. Some organizations even implement a common “power hour” for all employees, helping standardize quiet time across a workplace.16

How do you make yourself, or encourage your employees to make themselves, less accessible in constantly connected and urgent workplaces? Try shutting your office door, blocking off time in your calendar, putting a sign on your door that indicates you shouldn’t be interrupted, such as “On Deadline,” or putting in headphones. You may find one approach works better than another in your workplace, but don’t be afraid to be creative and communicate with your coworkers. A former manager at Coca-Cola® used to put on his red baseball cap whenever he was on deadline to indicate to employees that, despite keeping his office door open, he should only be interrupted during those times for an emergency.17 Try to get your entire department or workplace onboard with a consistent signal, and then don’t abuse it.

Another way to combat work interruptions is to set up meetings. No worries—these aren’t marathon meetings that already take up much of your workweek. These are scheduled times for seemingly little things like phone calls or getting feedback from your supervisor. Instead of telling a client that you’ll call him back later this week, tell him a specific day and time you’ll call, put it in your calendar and follow through. Instead of just stopping by your supervisor’s office for feedback or with questions, schedule a meeting. This doesn’t mean an “open-door policy” is dead, but as Elizabeth Grace Saunders, the author of “How to Invest Your Time Like Money” and a time coach, explains, scheduling one-on-one meetings or calls can boost productivity.18


“By creating a culture where these regular meetings are respected and dropping by is the exception, not the norm, you create a much more respectful, efficient, and effective culture in which everyone has a better ability to align their time investment with their priorities.”

Plan breaks

Boost your productivity by planning breaks—the right kind—throughout your day. To be truly restorative, a five- or 10-minute work break should be active, such as stretching, walking around the office or even taking a short walk outside. Active breaks help restore attention, as well as increase creativity and productivity.\(^\text{19}\) Meditation, which helps create inner calm and peace, has also been found to increase clarity and ability to focus, so your active break may consist of meditation.\(^\text{20}\)

Your options for active breaks depend upon your work environment, but instead of scrolling through your social media feed while slumped over your desk, get up and get moving for at least a few minutes during your day. Vacations are another form of work breaks that can benefit employees and organizations alike. However, American workers are using less vacation time now than they have at any point during the last 40 years.\(^\text{21}\) Some organizations discourage vacation, leading employees to either not use their vacation days or, when on vacation, to still be accessible and working.

In his studies about employee performance and vacation, Shawn Achor, best-selling author of “The Happiness Advantage,” shows vacation increases worker productivity, leading to increased sales and revenue for businesses.\(^\text{22}\)

“The greatest competitive advantage in the modern economy is a positive and engaged brain, and to be truly engaged, [your] brain needs a break,” says Achor. Employers can create a culture that encourages employees to take vacation (breaks) and, in turn, have more satisfied and productive employees. This may also help decrease employee burnout and increase employee retention.

Overall, whether a 10-minute active break during the work day or a week-long vacation, employers should strive to create a culture where planned breaks are encouraged. Employees, in turn, should then give themselves permission to unplug and take a break or vacation without fear of getting behind on work or being looked over for a promotion.

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22 Ibid
Take greater control of technology

Because technology has changed the way we communicate, we must change the way we manage interruptions. You can’t shut your office door on your phone or e-mail; however, you can turn off notifications and alerts for your phone, e-mail and social media accounts. Much like communication batching, turning off notifications puts you in control.

An even more proactive approach to combating distractions, particularly digital distractions, is to manage the amount of e-mails and alerts you receive. How do you and your team do this? Do an audit of your inbox, social media platforms and apps. Can you unsubscribe to any of the e-mail newsletters that fill your inbox? On Facebook®, are there organizations you can “unlike” and, in turn, create fewer newsfeed items you have to scroll through during the day? Do the same for other social media sites. By doing an audit, you cut down on the amount of information you receive and, thus, have fewer daily interruptions.

Lastly, workplace interruptions can decrease when you choose the correct medium to communicate with your coworkers, supervisors, vendors and other professionals. What is the urgency of your need? If it’s an actual emergency, stopping by your supervisor’s office is most likely a better option than sending an e-mail. Though, don’t abuse “emergency” status situations. Determine the best medium for whatever you need to communicate. When communicating, be sure to include a timeframe for expected response or resolution. If an answer is needed before Thursday, politely say that in your e-mail or when you call. If you’re just passing along information that doesn’t require a response, then indicate that as well. Choosing the best communication medium and method for your message may seem like a simple way to decrease workplace interruptions but may be a starting point to creating a more focused, productive team and workplace.

Your organization is affected by many conditions and situations that are out of its control; however, you can help manage interruptions, which have shown to negatively affect performance, satisfaction and finances. Try some of the suggested interruption management strategies, and encourage your employees to do the same. Distractions can be quite personalized, so help your team determine where each member can individually decrease interruption and distraction.

Through managing distractions, you can create an environment ripe for productivity, which is required for success in an increasingly competitive global market and our rapidly changing world.23

Edward Hallowell, author of “Driven to Distraction at Work: How to Focus and Be More Productive,” says managing interruption in the workplace requires creating

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boundaries on an individual, team and organizational level.24
“Create boundaries. The boundaries have to fit the job situation. It may be email
boundaries, closing your door, a schedule where you prioritize and don’t allow
meetings to run on endlessly. That’s the key to allowing your brain to work at its
best,” says Hallowell. “The point is, I want to invite people to look into their own
selves and see, what is their proclivity, what is their vulnerability, and combine
that with practical solutions.”

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