

# I Get Interrupted, Therefore I Am by Jeff Davidson

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**Jeff Davidson** "The Work-Life Balance Expert," is a preeminent time management authority, has written 59 mainstream books, and is an electrifying professional speaker, making 806 presentations since 1985. Jeff believes that career professionals today in all industries have a responsibility to achieve their own sense of work-life balance. His article below discusses how to repair the common problem of technological interference in our everyday lives.



Interruptions have become a way of life in contemporary society. From the ultra-rude theater patrons, who have no concern for everyone else while fielding cell phone calls, to the unwitting staff member who asks too many questions of you, without consulting other sources that could provide the answer.

It seems as if we're in an environment now where constant interruptions is the norm. How did this happen? Some places were once considered sacred: concert halls, churches, movie theaters, and even restaurants, in terms of not having one's fellow diners pull out a cell phone and engage in a call. Oddly, many individuals often act in ways contrary to their upbringing when in proximity to mobile communication devices. Are they compelled to drop or ignore all else and pay homage to the "machine"?

## Interruption Corruption

The predominance of the cell phone does not fully explain why each of us have a greater propensity to interrupt others, as well as accept the slight and the irritation of being interrupted. The opportunity to do business on the fly, connect with loved ones, or simply stay in the loop with others has subconsciously and nonverbally trumped thousands of years of basic human interaction.

Much of the intrusion that we foist upon others seems harmless enough. Being an early riser, I am often at my desk at 6 a.m. If I send you an email at 6:05, that seems harmless enough. After all, you'll simply receive it when you receive it, who cares when I sent it? But you might have arisen at 6 a.m. yourself. You might have encountered that email hours before you needed or wanted to see it. Many others might have sent you early morning emails as well.

Taken in full, day after day, and week after week, the brunt of email messages that we send and receive, on top of all the other forms of communication, adds up to a growing throng of tasks to which we feel compelled to attend, and unfinished business that never seems to diminish in volume or frequency.

Too often, we pepper each other with too much information and communication, thus helping to propagate a fundamental shift in human behavior. If you doubt this, think about the last time you had a 30 or 60-minute stretch to work completely free of interruptions. When have you had the opportunity to meet with a friend without one of you checking up on messages, which of course, are unrelated to your time together?

## To Easy for Our Own Good

Our computers and mobile devices have made sending and receiving messages so simple that it's become problematic. In his article, "The Speed of Sound," published in Earth Light magazine, Spring 2001, author David Orr

asks, “can communication be too easy or too cheap?” Controversial for his time, Orr said, “Electronic communication is now standard in most organizations. The results, however, were mixed at best. The most obvious was a large increase in the sheer volume of stuff we receive and reply to, much of it utterly trivial.”

Orr observed, “Our conversations, thought patterns, and institutional inner clocks are increasingly shaped to fit the imperatives of technology. Not surprisingly, more and more people feel overloaded by the demands of incessant communication. But to say so publicly, is to run afoul of the technological fundamentalism that is now dominant virtually everywhere.” He finished with a startling declaration: “It is time to consider the possibility that – for the most part – communication ought to be somewhat slower, more difficult, and more expensive than it is now. And, only over generations, through a process of trial and error, can knowledge eventually congeal into cultural wisdom about the art of living well within the resources, assets, and limits of a place.”

What a concept! Our missives ought to be a bit slower and a bit more difficult to achieve. It seems like a giant technological step backward, but is it? Consider the socio-cultural as well as personal benefits if everyone received half, or a third, or a quarter of the daily messages they now receive. I, for one, would revel in it. Even if reluctantly at first, eventually so would you.

### **Partners in Progress**

Not one of us can make our interruption-based culture less onerous. We can, however, make changes in our immediate environment, with our own correspondents. We can be more diligent and thoughtful in what we choose to send. Within weeks, or months at the most, we can train others to not overwhelm us.

We can practice the Golden Rule as it applies to the sanctity of someone else’s space, making fewer interruptions and offering higher quality messages at digestible intervals, in the manner and form that best suits the other party. What we give out we tend to receive. Effective communication partners, in time, begin to emulate each others interaction pattern.

The positive changes that you make within your inner circle are likely to be revisited upon you as others acknowledge on some level, and accept and emulate your practices. It is not our sealed fate to be endlessly interrupted throughout our days. Whether or not this is a socio-cultural phase that will eventually diminish, the norm forever more, or the harbinger of an even more frenetic external environment, we can take the time, and expend the effort to make our personal environment more suitable for rumination and reflection, and concentration and focus, as well as remaining responsive to others.



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