

# Leading Company

## How to withstand a barrage of interruptions

30 August 2012 Jeff Davidson



For career professionals seeking to be highly productive, interruptions represent a “breaking apart” of their ability to stay focused and strive for the completion of the task at hand.

In many work environments today — the traditional office as well as in mobile settings — each of us is subject to too many interruptions to even approach our potential level of productivity.

Unprecedented challenges call for unprecedented solutions. It is not enough to turn your mobile phone ringer or vibration mode off. It is insufficient to believe that merely closing your office door will safeguard you from intruders. It is folly to believe that tomorrow is somehow going to be better than today if we don’t take measures that guarantee we can work for 30, 60, or 90 minutes undisturbed when we need to.

Many years ago I met with the CEO of a large company in his office on the top floor of a building. From this vantage point, he was able to look out of large-picture windows in three directions, including to the west for dozens of kilometres into the countryside. His office, the foyer leading into it, the receptionist’s area prior to that, and the entire floor was noticeably quieter than any of the floors under it. Like so many other top executives, he knew the importance of being able to marinade in his own thoughts.

### The quiet to reflect

Those in the top rungs of organisations who aspire to high achievement instinctively understand the importance of safeguarding their environment. They understand the value of being able to reflect upon the challenges before them, to use their full cerebral capabilities, and to craft a plan or devise a solution to meet

those challenges.

In our own lives and careers, sometimes we don't have the choice of working on a quiet floor with barriers surrounding our workspace that ensure the quiet that we need to concentrate. We do, however, have options, regardless of our work environment, that can increase the probability we will have vital stretches throughout the day and the week where we are free of disturbances and can safely predict that interruptions will not take us off course.

Most career professionals, at some time throughout the week, have the opportunity to take command of their immediate environment through a variety of procedures that are quite well known but unfortunately not put into practice as often as one might do so.

### **Interruption-proof your environment**

In my book *Breathing Space*, originally published by MasterMedia in 1990 and revised several times since, I offer some suggestions for safeguarding your working environment and minimising interruptions:

Surround yourself with everything you need to engage fully in the change process, which might involve assembling resources, people, and space, as well as ensuring that you have a quiet environment free of distractions.

Give yourself the hours or days you need to read, study, and absorb what is occurring and to make decisions about how you'll apply new ways of doing things and new technologies to your career, business, or organisation.

Go "cold turkey," which is not recommended for most people! Suspend whatever else you're doing and engage in whatever it takes to incorporate a new way of doing things. This is enhanced by ensuring that you'll have no disturbances, by bringing in outside experts, and by assembling any other resources you need to succeed.

As an insurance commercial used to say, "Life comes at you fast." In the future, today will seem like an era of peace and tranquility. Life will come at us ever-faster as our technology and mobile devices connect us with more and more people, and information sources, around the world. We have to establish effective habits and procedures to buttress ourselves against what we know is coming: more information, more communication, more to sift through, more to learn, and more to respond to.

Our work week and our lives are finite. We can cram in only so much information within a given period of time. The ability to understand and absorb what we need to, and to keep at bay all the extraneous information that competes for our attention, is a skill which must be developed, honed, and refined now. It won't be any easier later.

The sooner we recognise that our interruption-based society is here to stay, at least for a while, the sooner we can embrace and securely put into place those measures that will ensure that we can be at our best for today and for the long run.

Jeff Davidson, 'The Work-Life Balance Expert®', is a time-management authority, author and professional speaker, making 806 presentations since 1985 to clients such as Kaiser Permanente, IBM, American Express, America Online and the World Bank. Jeff is also the executive director of the Breathing Space Institute.