

Rex Huppke: Calling time out on work interruptions

By Rex Huppke [Chicago Tribune](#)

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For most, the modern workday is one long series of interruptions punctuated by brief bursts of productivity.

For example, it took me 17 minutes to write that first sentence. I got an email after the word "modern," had to send a tweet after "interruptions," and then a co-worker stopped by after "brief" to tell me that if you sprinkled powdered sugar on Newt Gingrich, he'd look like a beignet.

Ever since work was invented in ancient Greece by Jerkios Dullopolos, humans have struggled to avoid distraction. But at times even a passing piece of dust can be more exhilarating than writing a status report, so our attention is called in other directions.

And the interruptions have proliferated.

A study released last year by the market research firm uSamp found that 45 percent of workers make it only 15 minutes before being interrupted, and more than half say they waste at least an hour a day on distractions.

The study was based on a survey of more than 500 employees at U.S. businesses of varying sizes. Predictably, most of the interruptions, nearly 60 percent, involved email, social networks and instant or text messaging.

Many of us see our incessant toggling between tasks as proof that we're brilliant multitaskers of a wired world. But research does not bear that out.

Every time you take your attention away from one task, it takes a little time to catch up once you return. That's time wasted.

A 2009 Stanford University study found that people who routinely receive information from multiple sources don't pay attention, control their memory or move from one project to the next as well as workers who handle one task at a time.

"Our human physiology has been in formation for tens of millions of years," said Jeff Davidson, author of "Breathing Space: Living & Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society." "We are hard-wired to give our attention in one essential direction when it's a major task or project we're undertaking. Yet here we are, making excuses as to why we need to be interrupted around the clock."

Part of that, I believe, is our innate desire to feel important. Admit it: When cellphones first became prevalent, you felt kind of awesome walking around with one. It meant you were someone of such value that you had to be reachable at any moment.

That vanity-driven sensibility is alive and well, with smartphones pinging throughout the day to announce urgent emails or texts.

"We have people that cannot confront solitude," Davidson said. "They need to know who has noticed them lately in the world. We all have become hooked on the next communique. We make excuses all day long about why we need to be on all the time, wired, connected, ready to be interrupted."

And that comes at a cost, forming what Davidson calls "a perfect Catch-22."

We face so many interruptions that we struggle to fit our work into an eight-hour day. So we multitask, which makes it harder to concentrate on an individual task, and we're still allowing interruptions to happen, so we're not getting everything done. Thus we work longer hours and multitask more, and on and on.

"It comes down to self-confidence," Davidson said. "We need to get back to a state in which we say, 'I know myself, I know how I work, I know what it takes for me to do this kind of job.' So then you give yourself, for example, a two-hour stretch uninterrupted."

That's, like, five years in Twitter time. But a big part of dodging interruptions is recognizing the ones that we can control.

Julie Morgenstern, author of "Never Check Email in the Morning," said: "It's important to recognize how much is coming from outside and how much is self-interruption. I think we self-interrupt just as much as we're interrupted by others."

She called email "an interruption chute" on which you can easily close the lid. By not letting yourself check email until 10 a.m., you can secure a good hour or more to focus on bigger things.

"The temptation is, 'Let me take care of all the little things people need from me, and then I can relax and focus,'" Morgenstern said. "That's kind of misguided, because the little things never stop."

She recommends flipping that plan — tackle the big tasks first and then pay attention to the ticky-tack stuff.

Morgenstern and Davidson agree that if you introduce a no-interruption policy for a couple hours a day, your bosses and co-workers will not only understand but also might follow suit.

"Everyone is dealing with the same problem," Morgenstern said. "You could ostensibly have a department meeting, a team meeting, a meeting with your boss and talk about how you need to balance responsiveness with individual work streams. Say, 'Can we agree that generally speaking the mornings are for uninterrupted work, unless it's a real emergency?'"

I can say from personal experience that the two times in my life I've focused solely on work have been fabulously successful. (This column is not the product of one of those times.)

But while we face a blinding array of potential distractions, it's bound to get worse as technology grows and we start getting Googles implanted in our bionic eyes.

To that end, Davidson points out the importance of training yourself now to shut down interruptions.

"Every day for the rest of our professional lives, the pace of society, the pace of business and the pace of communication are going to speed up," he said. "We've got to put our stake in the ground now and say, 'I've got to establish some personal discipline here, I've got to carve out some breathing space.'"

Otherwise our attention will be constantly fragmented, and we'll be unable to complete our ... to finish our ... ummmm ...

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