

Get Interrupted Less, Achieve More

by Jeff Davidson

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With office and workplace interruptions on the rise, career professionals everywhere are experiencing monumental struggles to stay focused. By some studies, today's typical worker is interrupted every 11 minutes and then takes another 25 minutes to return to the original task because of all the other distractions along the way.

The more often you can keep interruptions at bay, stay focused on the task at hand, and allow yourself to do your best work, the more you'll get done in a day. If the position for which you are hired requires that you be interrupted all day long, that's one thing. Most of us, most of the time, have options when it comes to safeguarding our workspace and allowing us to have some uninterrupted stretches of time where we can concentrate on the project or task before us.

Why do so many of us invite interruptions, or short of that, not vigilantly keep them at bay? Of many possible explanations for this phenomenon, three stand out:

1. Social media has enveloped the world, aided and abetted by mobile devices. Today, too many people are more fixated on the next communication they receive than staying focused on the task at hand. 'Nuff said.
2. Television, radio, movies, and all other forms of news, information, and entertainment have inexorably increased the pace at which they disseminate their messages.

The average camera angle on television changes every 3.5 seconds. Radio announcers now speak at faster paces than their counterparts of a generation ago. The typical movie plot and pacing is noticeably faster than movies of generation ago.

While we speak at about 125 words a minute, we can listen and intake information at three times that rate. Unless we train ourselves to slow down our focus on the message before us, and not be mentally drifting ahead, the swirl of communication that surrounds us pushes us to absorb information faster and faster.

Conversely, our professional tasks often require a slow pace. Our concentration often cannot be rushed. It takes a rare individual today to maintain separation between the rate at which he or she absorbs information from popular media, versus the rate at which he or she can understand, say, technical instructions, plotting a new strategy, or absorbing an internal staff report.

3. Reading is not pretty. Much of the work that you do in the course of a given day involves reading. By some studies, career professionals typically read between two to four hours a day, including emails, email attachments, other forms of electronic messaging, and traditional print documents. When you read, you're just sitting there, looking at a page or a screen. To those passing by, say in the hallway, it may appear that you're not doing too much.

By contrast, walking to the copier, posting a note on the wall, or conducting a meeting with others, requires some form of action. Who among us would rather sit and study, versus taking some sort of action? As human beings, we are predisposed to take action. Sitting and concentrating requires discipline. Contemplating new instructions or new tasks requires mental consternation which can be accompanied by mental angst.

The ability to communicate with anybody at anytime from any place around the world; the global media that bids us to pay attention to its ever-rapid dissemination of information, communication, and entertainment; and our inbred predisposition to take action rather than sit and contemplate, makes it seem as if the deck is stacked against you.

Yet, trailblazers in every industry and profession understand the importance of safeguarding their workspace from interruptions and distractions that would take them off course and render them from being less productive than they otherwise could be.

Such blessed individuals understand the need for quiet time. They are willing to barricade themselves from the outside world, if that's what it takes, to achieve mental clarity. Once having done so, they can perform at their best. They can make effective decisions. They are better able to lead.

In which camp will you choose to be? Will you join the masses who are buffeted daily by all manner of temptation resulting in less than stellar work performance? Or will you have the mental and emotional resolve to join the winners? Interruptions are the antithesis of concentration. To be at your best, you and you alone must take the steps necessary to safeguard your work environment. No one is coming to help you.

The choice is up to you.