

# Interruptions are Productivity Killers

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In computer science, an interruption is a signal to a computing device that halts the execution of a program in progress so that some other action can proceed. In electrical engineering, an interruption comes in the form of a circuit which conveys a signal that stops the execution of a running program.

In everyday life, an interruption is a break in the action and is derived from the Latin words *inter*, which is to go between, and *ruptus*, which is to break off. Hence, an interruption can be described as something that comes between entities and separates them, such as you and the task you're attempting to complete! Curiously, *ruptus* is related to the word *rupture*, which in biology is defined as *a tearing apart of tissue*; in politics, *a breach of the peace*; or in everyday affairs, *a state of being broken apart*.

## Interruptions Impede Productivity

For career professionals seeking to be highly productive, interruptions represent a “breaking apart” of their ability to stay focused and strive for completion of the task at hand. In many work environments today — the traditional office as well as in mobile settings — each of us are prone to too many interruptions to even approach our potential level of productivity. Why? We are subjected to more potential interruptions than any previous workforce since homo erectus emerged from caves.

Unprecedented challenges call for unprecedented solutions. It is not enough to turn your cell phone's ringer 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 a certain number of 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 the Planning Research Corporation (PRC) in his office on the top floor of a building on K Street in Washington D.C. From this vantage point, he was able to look out of large picture windows in three directions, including to the west for dozens of miles into Virginia. His office, the foyer leading into it, the receptionist's area prior to that, the hallway leading to that, and the entire floor was notably more quiet than any of the floors under it. Like so many other top executives, he knew the importance of being able to marinate in his own thoughts.

## The Quiet to Reflect

Those reaching the top rungs of organizations and aspiring 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 utilize the full measure of their cerebral capabilities, and craft a plan or devise a solution to meet that challenge.

In our own lives and careers, sometimes we don't have the choice of working on a quiet floor with barriers surrounding our work space that ensure the quiet we need to concentrate on the challenges before us. We do, however, have options regardless of our working 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, 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*, I offer some suggestions for safeguarding your working environment and minimizing interruptions:

- Surround yourself with everything you need to fully engage in the change process, which also 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 technology to your career, business, or organization.

- Go "cold turkey," which is not recommended for most people! Suspend what ever 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, bringing in outside experts, and assembling any other resources you need to succeed.

As a current insurance commercial says, "Life comes at you fast." In the future, today will seem like an era of peace and tranquility. Life will come at us continuously 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's 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 only cram in so much information within a given period of time. The ability to understand and absorb what we need (and keep at bay all the extraneous information that competes for our attention) is a skill that must be developed, honed, and refined quickly. It won't be any easier later on.

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