Top 6 Strategies for Managing Interruptions in the Workplace

By Kristina Schneider, Executive Assistant

According to a study conducted in 2009, the average time spent per day by employees being interrupted and trying to refocus is 2.1 hours. Interruptions at the workplace is estimated to cost businesses in the U.S. over half a trillion dollars each year!*

While interruptions at the workplace are inevitable, it doesn't mean that they cannot be minimized or reduced.

Below are what I consider to be the top ten strategies for managing (and reducing) the amount of interruptions at the workplace.

Strategy #1: Evaluate (and change) your physical workspace.

One of the biggest eye-openers for me in managing my own workplace interruptions was an evaluation of my workspace, including how the furniture is arranged in my work area so seeing and hearing others is minimized.

It is pretty obvious why workers in co-habited workspace (such as cubicles or open work areas) would tend to have more interruptions than individuals who have their own office. If you have your own office, great! Your interruptions should already be minimized. One thing you might need to do to minimize interruptions even further is shut your office door to avoid interruptions.
I also found that having my computer facing away from the door so that I was facing the door also resulted in a lot of interruptions. Every single time someone walked by, I'd find myself looking up, and being the social butterfly that I am, it would often result in a chatty conversation or a "Oh hey! Before I forget, can you help me with…" impromptu request (from either myself or my coworker). I realized this about myself and rearranged my office in a way that my computer was facing the wall and I was no longer tempted to meet eyes or say hello just because somebody walked by.

Managing and rearranging your physical workspace may not be possible for all workers, but most employers want their employees to be able to work efficiently and get what they need to be able to work. Sometimes all it takes is asking for what you need.

A bonus tip here for people that work in areas shared by others, is to get a set of headphones, so that you can listen to music. We have found this to eliminate a lot of interruptions that happen simply from overhearing conversations or being available to be interrupted.

Strategy #2: Evaluate (and change) yourself and your habits.

The second strategy for managing your interruptions is to evaluate and be willing to change your own habits. What am I talking about here?

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There are things that you might do which welcome or invite interruptions, such as leaving your e-mail open and having notifications pop up when you get an e-mail. E-mail can be a huge interruption if you let it be. Same with the phone. And not just the work phone, but even your personal cell phone. If you have it next to you, on your desk, with the sound on (or even with the vibrate notifications on), it can be very tempting to "just take a quick look at who messaged you". The next thing you know, you're having full blown conversations back and forth for 5, 10, 15 minutes and you're not only wasting your time, but you're not getting your work done and you're wasting your company's time and money!

Everybody is different. Determine what habits that you have which allow for interruptions and see what changes you can make to help minimize interruptions after honestly evaluating your behaviors.

Strategy #3: Set up inviolable work time.

With the exception of the receptionist, most people have the flexibility to set up inviolable work time. This is when you cannot be interrupted with a phone call, unscheduled meeting, a quick "chat", or some other office matter. While it's good that most offices have some kind of open door policy with respect to handling urgent and important matters in the office, a closed door policy might be needed to allow workers the interruption-free environment to actually get some work done.

Inviolable work time also means that there will be violable work time, where you will make yourself available to assist others, take a client call, and be interrupted for things that are urgent. This brings me to…

Strategy #4: Utilize the "U&I" Rule.

We are a huge proponent of the "U&I" Rule - - The Urgent and Important Rule. This means that the matter you have is *both* urgent AND important. The issue is important and the matter requires immediate attention. This varies from office to office, but some examples of situations where it might be a matter of "U&I" include, but are not limited to:

- An irate client on the phone needing assistance with a matter;
- A client in the office requesting something;
- A client calling from the bank or another advisor's office, needing a copy or some kind of information;
- A client calling to cancel (or reschedule) an appointment;

Or, an example where a client's request is not involved, The firm President needing some information in order to complete a scheduled task or assignment he or she is working on.

The degree of urgency and importance is sometimes hard to gauge at first, but you will find it much easier if you implement the next strategy, which is…

Strategy #5: Set up regular meeting times.

For most people, the reason they interrupt other coworkers is because they need something in order to complete a particular task they may be working on or they have questions that need answers. For companies that do not have regular meeting times set up between key staff people, the result is typically complete chaos! The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing and people don't know who to go to for what, so eventually they start just asking anyone or everyone that could possibly help them.

In addition to having a schedule of regular meeting times between staff members that frequently report to one another, also having a clear chain of command as to whom, where, how, and when people can turn to when they need something is extremely important when it comes to managing interruptions.

For example, some people will find themselves regularly turning to people that know the answer. This could be someone that's been there for a very long time or who has done that position before. But, that might not be the person that should really be interrupted or even consulted when you might need something. Just because they know the answer doesn't mean that they're the person to go to in order to get the answer. Knowing who and when to go to someone if you have questions or need something is important.

From there, you can decide how frequently you might need a regularly scheduled meeting to discuss things that are needed in order to complete your job tasks. This could range from twice a day (once in the morning and again in the afternoon) to once a day, to once a week, or even once every other week. It just depends on how often people need assistance that might require a meeting, instead of a regular interruption.

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Strategy #6: Be willing to say "no".

Last, but not least, the final strategy for managing interruptions is being willing to say "no". This may not always be possible, depending on who is interrupting you and what kind of relationship that you may have with him or her. What I'm talking about here is being willing to tell the person interrupting you, "I'm really sorry, but I need to get this task done before I can assist you. Can we discuss this at our next meeting? Or, can it wait until I get this done?" While some people might feel a little bit put off at first, they will understand and appreciate that you're just trying to do your job and work towards the same goal they are, which is the make the company successful. It's really about how you say no, not that you're saying no. For most situations, you're not even saying "no", but rather, "Can this wait until I'm free?".

Protecting your own work time and managing your interruptions directly is, by far, one of the best strategies you can utilize in the workplace.

*Source: Basex.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristina Schneider is the current Executive Director of The Ultimate Estate Planner, Inc. She graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration from Pepperdine University in 2004 and was hired right out of college to work for the Law Firm of Kavesh, Minor & Otis, coordinating and facilitating Philip Kavesh's "Missing Link" Boot Camps while also providing administrative support to Mr. Kavesh as his Executive Assistant for over seven years. Through her direct hands-on experience in Mr. Kavesh's law firm, Kristina has been able to assist numerous estate planning professionals through The Ultimate Estate Planner and, equally as important, many of their staff members, in the successful implementation of Ultimate Estate Planner's products and systems.

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