



Managing Interruptions

What happens when too many different communication messages are bombarding you? Many people find that regular interruptions – phone calls, emails, visitors – prevent them making progress with their important tasks. This means that they are less effective and it often leads to feelings of stress and annoyance. This doesn't apply to everyone and if you are comfortable with your multi-tasking skills and enjoy such interruptions then don't bother with this month's column. For everyone else, please read on....

Here are a few hints that may be helpful in regaining some power over your interruptions in order to provide some greater control over the 168 hours available to you each week:

1. Practice Saying "No"

Most professionals are, in my experience, friendly and helpful people. You can certainly have worse problems but it usually results in an inability to say "no". Clients, colleagues, team members, friends and family are after a chunk of your time because they respect you and your talents. Your response is usually "sure, no problem, happy to help". But where does this leave your priorities?

It is important to practise saying "no", politely and respectfully. You have probably built up a store of good will from your history of being friendly and helpful – so use it. When someone seeks your input, and it is not directly aligned with your immediate objectives, here are some options:

- Find someone else to help them
- Challenge them to solve it themselves
- Find a later time that suits you both to address the issue

I understand that this can be a challenge in this wonderful era of open plan office design. So if you do have an office it's a good idea to selectively close the door.

Please ensure that the majority of your time is devoted to you what is important to you – not someone else.



2. Manage Your Email

The fundamental principle here is that if you are engaged in a very important task then don't be interrupted by a machine. If your email system signals you when an email arrives, by sound or symbol, I suggest that you turn it off. The distraction of the email notification can interrupt your thinking and, of course, you probably won't be able to resist the temptation of seeing what the message is about.

An alternative is to impose some self-discipline and only check your emails when you have completed your very important task. This may require some management of other people's expectations if you are used to replying to them within 10 minutes. I can assure you that it is possible to maintain a healthy business relationship without responding immediately to someone's emails.

3. Manage Your Telephone

The same principle applies here: if you are engaged in a very important task then why would you risk being interrupted by a telephone call? You have the option to turn off your mobile and forward your landline. Most modern telephones have answering/message capability and I suggest that you use it when you are focused elsewhere.

If you are going to be more dependent on your answering service then please check your recorded message to improve the chances of a successful return call. Try something like: "Sorry I am unavailable. Please let me know what you are ringing about and a good time to call back." This helps you assess their purpose and perhaps prepare for the return call. It also reduces the risk of telephone tag by finding a suitable time to call back rather than experience the frustration of a series of unsuccessful attempts when they are unavailable.

What are the benefits of making these controversial changes to your working practices? Your time is used more effectively, with fewer interruptions. When you catch up with your manager/colleagues/clients/team members you can provide your full attention rather than be pre-occupied or, worse, annoyed with them. It may take, however, some courage to change your habits in order to manage your communication interruptions and to feel in control of your working life.