

Dealing with workplace interruptions

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The workplace has become a culture of interruption. A visitor interrupts. A loud voice outside our space demands our attention. But external stimuli aren't the only factors. Even with multitasking, an essential for many jobs, one task interrupts another.

If you can't escape interruptions, can you join them by doing a task over and over to diminish their effect? "To reduce the negative consequences of an interruption, practice is not enough," said Deborah Boehm-Davis, who heads the psychology department at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

"If you practice the task alone, you will get better at that task, but you don't get any better at doing the task in the presence of interruptions," she said. "To learn to deal with interruptions, you need to practice the task while being interrupted." Some of her insights were published in "Mitigating Disruptions: Can Resuming an Interrupted Task Be Trained?" in the *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Conference*.

Could it be that you are inviting interruptions – even if you claim to be annoyed?

Rabbi Yitzchak Goldman thinks so. He presents a workshop called "The Soul Diet: Ten Steps Toward Metaphysical Health," through Neeman House Publishers LLC in Seattle, and says, "You may give off signals for someone to take you out of this.

"Body language can reveal whether people are totally immersed in their work and are 'uninterruptible,' or whether they are merely hovering over their work and 'available' for interruptions."

For example, tapping your pen on your desk may signal openness to distraction and invite a person to make a comment about the weather. Gossipmongers also seek distraction. Leaving your e-mail on to listen for the bell of an incoming message or sliding your eyes down to your toolbar when the icon appears are other signals of not really wanting to be focused.

If you're absolutely certain that you don't want to be interrupted, there are a number of steps to take. Some interruptions are easily controllable, thanks to technology and the nature of the interruption. Forward your telephone into voice mail. Check your e-mail only a few times each day. Arrange for mail and other deliveries to be made outside your door or cubicle.

Jeff Davidson, founder of the Breathing Space Institute in Chapel Hill, N.C., recalls consulting with a supervisor whose six employees asked more questions than he could handle, at least one each every two hours.

"If one employee asked a question every two hours," Mr. Davidson explains, "he asked an average of four questions each day. With six employees, that meant 24 questions a day, or 120 interruptions each week, resulting in disruptions of the manager's work three times each hour in a 40-hour week."

The problem soon became surmountable. Mr. Davidson came up with four categories of questions that he thought covered those most frequently asked or likely to be. The categories were:

- Topics covered in the policy manual, which he'd then ask employees to refer to directly.
- Questions answerable by a co-worker or bookkeeper.
- Things in need of a "yes" or "no" response, dispatched by "a quick phone call or buzz on the intercom."