



Work-Life Balance

GET FOCUSED: HOW TO MANAGE INTERRUPTIONS AT WORK

by Dori Salzman / May 24, 2012

Keeping our communication addiction in check, concentrating on priorities and putting fear aside are three of the most effective ways to stay on track at

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Nobody is coming to help you set them.*

Jeff Davidson, the Breathing Space Institute

REMEMBER WHAT MATTERS MOST

It's easy for travel agents to let email interrupt their work day, pulling them away from important business priorities. We all do it.

But whatever you do, make sure that your personal priorities don't take a back seat to your email addiction at work, suggests Jeff Davidson, executive director of the Breathing Space Institute.

work in the face of constant interruptions. Without these skills a busy travel agent can easily be overwhelmed by interruptions, which typically account for nearly 30% of one's day.

The typical business professional is interrupted every 11 minutes. If the interruption were simply a 30-second blip it wouldn't be so bad. But on average it takes 25 minutes to get back to the point where we were when first interrupted.

Worse, a quarter of the time, we never even get back to the task we were working on at the time we were interrupted.

Expert perspective

"You only have to have a couple of interruptions in the morning or afternoon and your whole day seems disrupted," Jeff Davidson told *Travel Market Report*.

Davidson, who is trademarked as "the Work-Life Balance Expert," is the executive director of the Breathing Space Institute and author of *Breathing Space* and *Simpler Living*, among other works. He has presented his approach to work-life balance to companies such as American Express, Bank of America, IBM and Lufthansa.

Travel Market Report asked Davidson to advise busy travel agents on how to manage the constant influx of interruptions in their daily lives.

Email addiction . . .

"In this day and age, there are so many new ways we can be interrupted," Davidson said. "We have an entire industry of travel professionals who must learn for the first time, or learn anew, how to safeguard their time. If you don't, it surely will be taken up – guaranteed."

One of the most common interruptions is email, which can easily pull you off course. Yet most people have an irrational need to check their inbox every five or 10 minutes.

"You can become addicted to almost anything, and the wired world is now addicted to its next communiqué. It's hard for people to go 30 or 40 minutes at a stretch without checking email."

. . . and how to overcome it

Like any addiction, time away from the source creates anxiety, thus the irrational need to check email as often as possible. Davidson suggests travel sellers strike a compromise with themselves.

“Set a timer for every 15 minutes and allow yourself to just click on your email software then. See what’s there, eyeball it and then go back to what you were doing. Nine out of 10 times what you get, you don’t need to respond to. But you feel relieved because you saw what happened during the time you were away from it.”

If something does need to be dealt with, do it and go straight back to what you were doing, he added.

Set aside fear

Some of our communication addiction is derived from fear – the fear that we’ll miss an all-important call, the fear that the boss expected an answer to his or her email five minutes ago, the fear that a missed email is a missed opportunity.

“This litany of negative messages plays in your head all day long – ‘I’m not keeping up. I’m inadequate. I can’t compete otherwise. I’ll fall behind. They’ll think I’m incompetent,’” Davidson said.

A fraction of that fear may be justified. “Some people report to workaholic bosses who expect everybody else to be a workaholic. Some bosses send out emails as if they were phone calls or instant messages.

“But that’s not everybody, that’s a fraction. People simply impose that on themselves,” Davidson said.

Getting past self-induced paranoia

Four out of five times such paranoia is probably self-induced, he added. Being aware that the perceived danger is just that – perceived – is the first step to reclaiming time spent monitoring email.

Once you’re aware of your paranoia, Davidson says you can take small steps in the right direction.

“You don’t want to go cold turkey. Give yourself an hour where you’ll focus on the task at hand, but check email every 15 minutes. But just check it. Then expand that to two hours. Everybody can reclaim some portion of their day, even if it’s just an hour to begin with.”

While it’s nice to take a break now and then with a fun email or two, don’t let them suck you in.

Eyes on the priorities prize

Keeping your priorities top of mind is another way to minimize the impact of interruptions.

“Be clear on your priorities; that just takes a mental review at the beginning of each day,” Davidson said. If an incoming phone call or email will not serve the priorities you set for yourself for the day, put them aside for later.

While most of what travel agents do is important, very few tasks are critical around the clock, every moment of every day. “If you don’t set boundaries, guess what? Nobody is coming to help you set them,” Davidson said.

Resources

Free audio lessons. Visit Davidson’s [website](#) for 10 free audio lessons on topics ranging from prioritizing your time and information overload to avoiding multitasking. The site also links to numerous articles on work-life balance issues.