

Focus Breakers: Managing Interruptions & Distractions

By Kathleen Barton, MBA

In order to be most productive, you need to focus on your most important priorities. However, even when you've planned your day and prioritized your tasks, unexpected things come up. The boss gives you an important assignment, a co-worker asks for your help, or a customer calls for information. How do you handle these interruptions? First, assess the importance of the interruption. If it is both important and urgent, then address it immediately. Other times you may get interruptions that are untimely or even unnecessary – people stopping by your desk to chat or vendors calling to sell their services. These interruptions are what I call focus-breakers.

Interruptions happen every eight minutes on average in the workplace. No wonder we have a hard time getting our work done! This can be very distracting to say the least. The average interruption lasts 5-10 minutes, plus it takes about five minutes to recover and get back to work. That's an average of 15 minutes per interruption.

How about interruptions which come from electronic devices? In this age of voicemail, e-mail, pagers and cell phones, we receive constant interruptions. Nowhere in America do we use answering machines to screen out calls and then have Call Waiting so we won't miss a call from someone we didn't want to talk to in the first place! Ironic, isn't it? How can we use these devices to our advantage? How can we minimize these distractions and handle interruptions?

Typically these distractions and interruptions fall into three categories: visitors, phone calls and e-mail.

Visitors

Here are tips for effectively handling visitors who stop by your office or desk when you're working on an important project.

- If someone wants to discuss something that isn't urgent, ask to schedule time to talk later.
- If someone just wants to visit or is rambling, ask, "How can I help you?" This helps them get to the point quickly.
- When someone enters your cubicle or office to talk, stand up. The conversation will last shorter if you're standing rather than sitting.
- Close the door to your office. (Yes, it is okay to close your door!)
- If you work in a cubicle, then use a sign indicating that you're busy, such as "Working on an important project" or "Working against a deadline".
- Find a hideaway. If you're working on a project that requires focused work, then find an empty conference room to work for a period of time. I used to do this when preparing to teach classes.
- Post available hours. This is especially helpful for managers and supervisors. Many supervisors think they need to always be available to their staff. However, you don't need to be available ALL the time, or you'd never get anything done! Most employees understand and are agreeable to waiting until posted hours (unless of course, it's urgent).

Phone Calls and E-mail

Here are tips to minimize interruptions from phone calls or e-mail.

- Let your phone go to voicemail when working on an important project.
- Schedule time to return calls and e-mail a few times a day. Many people get distracted by the phone and e-mail. Rather than checking your voicemail and e-mail consistently throughout the day, schedule time to do so. This will help you be more focused on the task at hand.
- Turn off e-mail notification. Do you get distracted by e-mail? My friend, Vicki, can't resist seeing who e-mailed her every time she hears the tone indicating that she has mail. If you're like Vicki, then turn off the tone, so you won't be tempted.
- Read messages in your Inbox only once. Answer it immediately if possible, or delete it, or move it to a project-specific folder.

By following these tips to manage or minimize interruptions, you can focus on your most important priorities and be more productive!

*Kathleen Barton is a keynote speaker, workshop presenter, and life coach specializing in life purpose, career success, and work-life balance. She is the author of **The Balancing Act: Managing Work & Life** audio/workbook. Kathleen can be reached at www.YourLifeBalanceCoach.com.*