AUTHOR: VICTORIA TUCKER
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5 TIPS TO MINIMIZE
INTERRUPTIONS

Otherwise, you could be spending as much as 45 minutes to get your focus back.

According to researchers at the University of California, Berkley, the impact of interruptions cannot be overstated. "They kill our momentum. When we start again on our task, we cannot simply pick up where we left off...we must reorient ourselves, re-immerse, and re-gain our momentum. The length of our recovery time depends on the complexity of our task; ranging anywhere from 8 minutes for simpler tasks to 25 minutes for more complex ones."

They go on to state "*At point of interruption*, we lose our focus, and our progress comes to a stop. Our attention is ripped away, our brain abruptly shifts, our momentum is gone, and with it any feeling of satisfaction. No matter how brief the interruption, the damage is done."

Erick Altmann, a professor at Michigan State University in East Lansing, writes that even "Two seconds is long enough to make people lose the thread."

Research from UC Irvine shows the following data on workplace interruptions:

- 12 mins 40 seconds (Average time spent on a task before being interrupted).

- 25 mins 26 secs (Average time elapsed before returning to work on the same task. This could extend to 45 minutes based on the complexity of the task).

- 15 mins (Average time required, after resuming a difficult task, to get back into the same level of intense concentration. Again, time could be much greater depending on the complexity of the work in process).

- 2.8 secs (Length of interruption required to cause subjects to commit twice the number of computer errors).

- 63 (Percentage of tasks that are interrupted in open-plan offices).

- 49 (Percentage of tasks that are interrupted in private offices).

As the researchers suggest (and most professionals will concur) frequent interruptions can also lead to "higher rates of exhaustion, stress-induced ailments, and a doubling of error rates."

5 Quick Tips to Manage and Minimize Disruptions

Controlled & Planned Interruptions

Research suggests there is less disruption if an interruption occurs in controlled and planned ways.

Example: First, get into the habit of scheduling 30 to 45-minute concentrated work periods at your peak hours of brain energy. *Train yourself* to avoid looking at emails, notifications, or picking up the phone during this time.

Example: If you expect an interruption at a certain time (like a call from a business partner), you can minimize the stress and frustration of an interruption to that deeper concentration by scheduling "task bursts" during the period closest to the expected call. A task burst could be a short action (like reading or sending an email).

Example: Often, interruptions have a "face" – in other words there may be one or two coworkers that tend to interrupt you with an "urgent request." Depending on the work relationship, be proactive (vs reactive) by scheduling time (along with a clearly scoped agenda) with those coworkers to preempt their "on-the-fly" interruptions.

The "Memory for Goals" Technique

Studies suggest using a "memory for goals" strategy can help you more quickly return to the task after an interruption.

Example: Immediately prior to engaging in the interruption, mentally note what you were doing and what needs to be done next. Even better, take a moment to jot down a key word or two to prompt you.

Micro Breaks

Incorporate short breaks before resuming work after an interruption. This can help clear mental clutter and reduce cognitive overload.

Example: Techniques like deep breathing and physical stretching can be particularly effective.

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Task Prioritization

After an interruption, reassessing the priority of tasks can help in focusing on what is most crucial and reduce the cognitive load of deciding what to do next.

> Example: Create, edit, and reference a Mind Map illustrating those BIG PRIORITIES that must be accomplished for the week or month.

Environment Management

Minimize external distractions to shorten the recovery time after interruptions.

> Example: Make physical changes to your workspace (like using noise-cancelling headphones).

> Example: Use software that blocks digital interruptions like those entertaining, but pesky, social media notifications.

While there is no way to circumvent interruptions, there are ways to minimize their negative impact on the work you do. While it takes time to forge new habits, you can take back control of your schedule which can translate into reduced stress, less exhaustion, and fewer errors – who wouldn't love that!

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