

Task Interference: The Silent Performance Killer

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You've got a brand new workday ahead of you. There's a lot to be done, and you've prepared your to-do list, complete with tasks and times. You're ready and eager to get going. Then, just as you're about to begin...life happens. Somehow an endless array of interferences spring up from nowhere and begin to erode your preciously planned time.

Where Does This Come From?

According to a study from Basex, an information technology research firm, workplace interruptions take the form of distractions, interruptions and interferences. They consume 2.1

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hours, or a whopping 28 percent, of our workday and cost the American economy \$588 billion annually. This includes not only time lost from the suspended work task, but also the recovery time. University of California, Irvine researchers Gloria Mark and Victor Gonzalez tracked office workers in a detailed observation study. They discovered that workers experienced a task interruption every 11 minutes and then took 25 minutes to return to the original task. They identified the major causes of task disruption to be colleagues stopping by to chat, being called away to perform another assignment, arrival of e-mails, a new task slipped in and telephone calls.

Even in life-and-death situations, task interferences invade the workplace. Researchers studied emergency physicians at work in five hospitals and found

that they were interrupted an average of 9.7 times per hour.

But Isn't This the Age of Multitasking?

You might think that modern workers can handle several things at once, but beware the consequences. Except for instances of routine, no-brainer tasks (e.g. feeding sheets of paper into a photocopier while reading a simple text), multitasking decreases performance. Anything that requires thought to perform demands undivided attention. Given two assignments to carry out simultaneously, both are executed more slowly—up to 25 to 50 percent—and

with more errors than if done individually. Over time, constant double and triple simultaneous demands on attention lead to psy-

chological stress and an overall productivity decline. Furthermore, research on the effects of multitasking shows that performance decreases as the number of simultaneous tasks increase.

What Does This All Mean?

Distractions, interruptions and task interferences, including simultaneous demands, all destroy productive performance. Distractions are generally environmental in nature. Ambient noises, movement, lighting changes, conversations in the next cubicle, even e-mail and instant messages draw away attention. The result is lost time to the distraction and then more time getting back to the original task.

Interruptions usually emanate from people or unexpected events (e.g. fire drill). Most interruptions such as passing social greetings, requests for assistance, trivial tasks (e.g. sign

a birthday card) or phone calls create mental interferences. The mind drifts from the task at hand and then must fight its way back.

The most insidious of all the distracters are those that are built right into the job. Here are some examples:

- Pharmaceutical representatives are expected to visit eight doctors a day, but also must file reports, organize lunch meetings, attend information and sales gatherings, make book reports and engage in a number of administrative tasks that eat away at the main job of doctor contact.
- Restaurant servers—whose main tasks are centered on serving the customer—also must prepare salads, clear tables, slice bread and even check bathrooms.
- Managers are often burdened with administrative tasks, requirements to participate in company rituals and political game-play.

What Can You Do?

As a workplace professional, you can assume three critical roles to reduce task interference and improve performance. First, as an analyst, you can systematically observe and identify the interferences that inhibit important tasks. Collect data. Demonstrate the powerfully negative impact these have on workplace performance. Secondly, as a consultant, work with managers and employees to eliminate unnecessary distractions, reduce interruptions—even pleasant, social ones—and get rid of those tasks that are not essential to job success. Finally, as an evaluator, monitor changes, gather data and communicate performance improvement results.

Elimination of task interference in the workplace is like cleaning house to reduce infection and illness. It might not be a glamorous role, but it is one that can lead to amazing performance success and improved workplace productivity. ♦



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