

The Importance of Uninterrupted Time

By Rhobera Shaler, PhD

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Have you ever been right in the middle of writing the perfect sentence when a co-worker or spouse appeared at the door with a need? Ever been working on a proposal and just as it really begins to come together your phone rings? Not only are these events annoying, irritating and downright infuriating, they are extremely inefficient uses of your time.

Research has shown that, when in the middle of a creative project, it takes up to twenty minutes to return to the same high-level of productivity following an interruption. That one fact alone could transform workplaces, couldn't it?

How do you create uninterrupted time? First, the work culture has to address the issue. Where there are cubicles, interruption can be constant. Your own level of concentration, then, becomes critical. Can you block out unwanted stimuli easily? Can you see people coming up to you from your work station? One of the truly disruptive things both physically and emotionally is the jolt you get when a person speaks to or touches you unexpectedly. It's a good idea to create a rear-view mirror for yourself if you cannot see folks approaching your cubicle. When you have to overcome both the mental interruption and the shock to the body, that's even more disturbing!

If you have an office door, you're lucky. Consult your schedule and block out times when that door will be shut. You may have to educate other staff members to the meaning of your closed door. At one business, I saw a sign on a closed door that read, "If you are thinking of knocking or opening this door, you really don't understand why it is closed!!! Think again." That may or may not work for you, however, it did make the intruder stop and think.

Does that telephone really need to be answered every single time it rings? Probably not. Does email have to be answered within thirty seconds of its arrival? Probably not. If not, what would it take for you to unhook yourself from the demands of those two instant communication systems. Develop the habits you need to be the most effective and efficient.

Constant interruption kills any hope of effective time management. One solution is to create regular meetings with the folks with whom you interact most at work. Use that time to address non-pressing issues and to foresee upcoming needs. Be pro-active. Head crises off at the path. This will cut down on your interruptions.

So, what if you are the lowest person on your work totem pole? That's tough from the perspective of minimizing interruptions. You may, in fact, be seen as the most available person in the office. You can still assess your workload and make suggestions as to when is the best time to bring you tasks

or ask for information. If you are very wise, you will make those suggestions sound like clear benefit statements to the staff, e.g., "In order for me to give you the very best service, I would like to have all your requests before 2 PM. That way, it is likely I can respond to them today."

At home, the same thing applies. Everyone needs quiet, uninterrupted time. Recently I was working with a coaching client who has a demanding job, a new baby and a husband who travels extensively for his work. Carving out at least one half-hour of uninterrupted time for herself is taking some persistence. Everything seems to be more demanding than her promises to herself. She's changing that quickly. Some folks seem to take much longer. How about you? Are you at the top of your totem pole for some time every day?

Give yourself the gift of uninterrupted time. The returns are amazing.

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