Interruption Management Techniques

GOAL: Manage interruptions so we can build more focus time into our days.

Note: interruption management techniques are designed to help you build more focus time into your day. Some of these ideas will work better for you than others. Use your discretion when deciding which of these strategies to adopt.

Email / Text / Instant Messaging

- Turn off new email alerts on both your computer and smartphone
    - *In Outlook: Tools -> Options -> Preferences -> Email Options -> Advanced Email Options -> un-check all email alert options*
    - *In Lotus: File -> Preferences -> User Preferences -> Mail and News -> Receiving -> clear the notification box*
    - *For iPhone: Settings -> Notifications, select Email app -> un-check Allow Notifications*
- Mark yourself as busy on messaging programs.
- Use your extended absence alert.
- Block time for email and minimize (or close) email when working on something else.

Phone Calls

- Put your smartphone on silent mode.
- State your availability in your phone greeting (i.e., how frequently you pick up messages).
- Put your phone on call forward.
- Put your smartphone away.
- Schedule phone calls to avoid playing "telephone tag".

Drop-by Visitors

- Close your office door.
- Post a sign on your door or cubicle, e.g., "in meeting" or "genius at work".
- Stand up when someone comes into your office. This immediately gives you more control over the duration of the interruption. You can wrap things up by either (a) sitting down or (b) take steps towards your door. This sends a subtle (but effective) message that you need to resume working.
- Get right to the point: Ask how you can help them; alternatively, ask them if you can follow-up with them at a later time; Refer them to someone else, where appropriate.
- Meet in someone else's office; This gives you the power to leave when you need to.
- Resist trying to solve every problem; Ask people for their recommendations.
- Work off-site.
- Tell someone when you will be free.

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- Encourage people to 'book 15 minutes'.
- Position yourself away from the door; making eye contact with people walking by can sometimes be an invitation to come in.
- Define department 'quiet hours' (e.g., 9 – 10am or 12 – 2 pm).
- Establish weekly meetings with individual team members; this provides people with a time/forum to review key items with you.
- Minimize early morning chats.

Self-Interruptions

- Leverage your partners. Suggest alternative people or resources.
- For each focus session: set a goal (what you want to accomplish), duration (when you plan to complete it), and reward (the thing or task that you will do immediately afterwards).
- Differentiate between interruptions that are "urgent" versus "nice to do". In most cases, it makes sense to shift focus to an urgent situation.
- Book an appointment with yourself; Block off time for focus sessions.
- Plan your day around when interruptions tend to happen; If interruptions are most frequent in the afternoon, find better times for your focused work.
- Schedule lunch, breaks, etc.
- Keep your task list close; Write down any action items/thoughts that you think of during the scheduled times that are not related to your current project. Free your mind to focus exclusively on the task at hand.
- Set and manage expectations of colleagues and clients.
- Share your routine / schedule / availability with others.
- Clear your desk of visual distractions.
- Many interruptions result from other people needing to clarify something with us. Make sure to clearly and succinctly state critical information in any of your requests. Also, strive to answer any email/voicemail questions completely the first time.

Open-Concept Office Environments

- Strive to use a low voice on calls.
- Keep cubicle conversations brief.
- Lower the ringer volume on your phone.
- Turn off email notifications.
- Use a sign system (e.g., Red light / Green light) to let others know when you are trying to focus.
- Generally be aware that others are trying to focus.
- Use headphones / music to block out background noise.
- Ask: "Is this a good time?"

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