

# Managing Interruptions

## Productivity Skills

Team FME

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## Preface

Interruptions are a major productivity killer and it can be very difficult to protect yourself from them whilst maintaining a good working relationship with your colleagues and external partners, for example customers and suppliers. This eBook describes the tactics you can use to protect yourself from interruptions without alienating others.

You will learn:

- How to develop a strategy for dealing with incoming calls including cold calls.
- How to 'close out' phone calls politely once they have achieved their purpose.
- The importance of body language in dissuading people from interrupting you.
- Why constant email checking is such a widespread problem and how to tackle it.
- The importance of dealing with your outbound calls and emails methodically.

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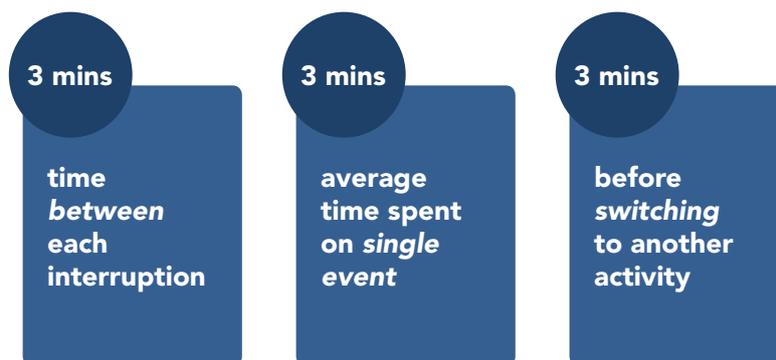
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## Introduction

According to research undertaken by Gloria Mark, Ph.D., associate professor at the Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences at the University of California, people can expect to be interrupted about once every three minutes.

Reference—Dabbish, L., Mark, G., and Gonzalez, V. (2011). Why Do I Keep Interrupting Myself?: Environment, Habit and Self-Interruption. *Proceeding of the twenty-ninth annual SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems (CHI 2011)*. ACM Press, Vancouver, B.C.

To arrive at this figure Dr. Mark and her team shadowed 36 managers, financial analysts, software developers, engineers, and project leaders for three days. They followed their subjects around during a working day and timed every event.



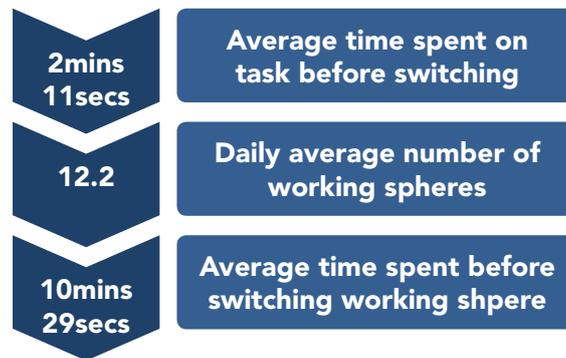
This study found that the average amount of time people spent on any single event before being interrupted or before switching tasks was about three minutes. This figure does not include time spent in formal meetings as it was assumed that people have limited control over their own productivity in this environment.

This study defined ‘an event’ as the amount of time that people spent in continuous, uninterrupted use of a device or a document, or in an interaction with another person.

Another area that this study investigated was how often people switched the focus of their work between unrelated tasks. The researchers chose the term ‘working sphere’ to describe an area of work where there was a common goal, a certain group of people, or other resources involved as well as its own timeframe or deadline.

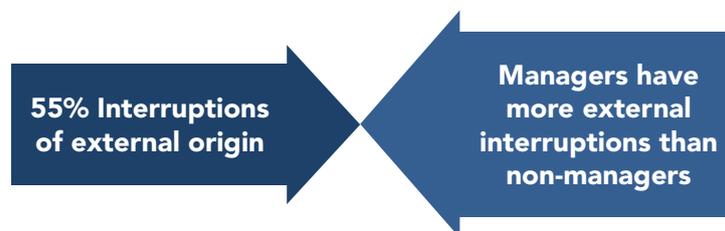
All of the events that were observed were assigned to a certain working sphere.

The results of this study showed that:



Even ignoring all interruptions that were two minutes or less, people only worked an average of 12 minutes and 18 seconds in a working sphere before switching.

One of the most interesting results of these findings is that people interrupted themselves almost as often as they were interrupted by external factors.



This suggests that either people are not particularly good at concentrating on one area of work for extended periods, or that procrastination may be a problem and people may be seeking respite from work that they find demanding.

If these periods without interruption seem unbelievably short, then you should spend some time surreptitiously watching how often people check their iPhone or BlackBerry for incoming emails and text messages. Even when people don't pick up a separate device, they are usually working on a computer with Web access where the temptation of Facebook, email, news pages, and other Internet distractions are only a mouse click away.

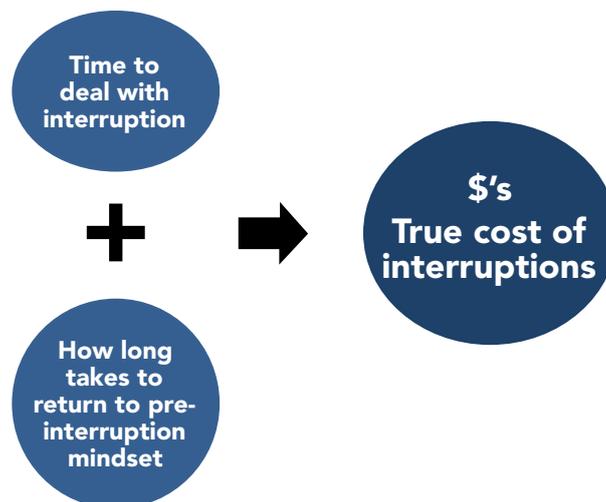
It is possible, then, that by reducing the number of longer interruptions, if even only slightly, people would be able to work on the same task for 20-30 minutes at a time, which is regarded as the optimal time to spend on a single task.

### KEY POINTS

- ✓ The average amount of time that people spend on any single event before being interrupted or before switching tasks is about three minutes.
- ✓ About 45% of the time people interrupt themselves and switch focus.
- ✓ Managers experience far more external interruptions than non-managers.

## The True Cost of Interruptions

The cost of these interruptions is twofold: firstly, the time it takes to deal with the interruptions themselves, which is easily quantifiable; and secondly, the cost of how long it takes you to return to the mindset you had before you were interrupted, which is often overlooked.



It is this 'double hit' on your valuable time that is most destructive to your productivity and is why you should adopt working practices that enable you to reduce your exposure

to them. However, it is not possible to negate all interruptions, as often many are unavoidable and are a natural part of the 'real world' in which you work.

There are a variety of ways you can avoid the guilt often associated with avoiding interruptions and one of the most effective is creating a 'screen' that allows you to work undisturbed. The type of screen you will use varies according to how long you require total focus on a particular task and according to your organization or department.

The types of screens you can use are:

- Secretarial—someone who can take your messages.
- Put your cell phone onto silent—no vibration or ringing.
- Turn off your email or messaging service bleeper.
- Find a quiet area to work outside of your usual one.

Whichever type of screen you use, it is essential that you inform those who would have otherwise interrupted you of when you are available to them. The screening method must not be used as a task-avoidance strategy!

The frequency and length of these 'protected' times will have to be carefully planned so that you don't create bottlenecks for those needing access to your time, otherwise you will create a new problem which will further erode your productivity.

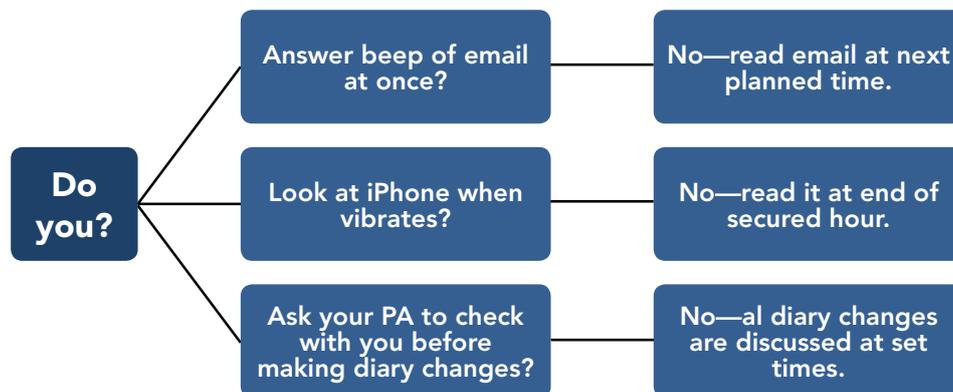
### KEY POINTS

- ✓ The 'double hit' of an interruption seriously undermines your productivity.
  - ✓ Try to screen yourself from interruptions at certain times during the day.
  - ✓ Plan these protected times carefully to avoid creating problems for others.
-

## Being in Control of Your Productivity

For you to be an effective manager you must incorporate practices that enable you to control the number and type of interruptions. A key element of your own productivity is ensuring you maintain good working relationships with all colleagues and external partners.

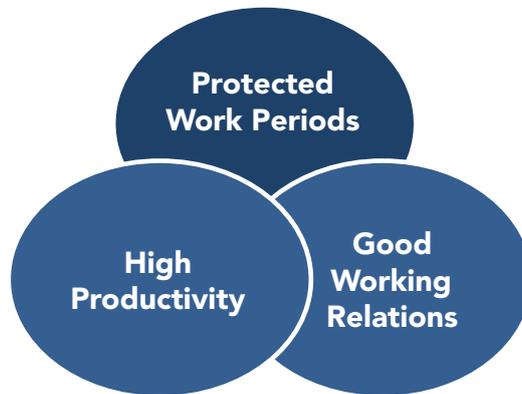
This doesn't mean that you have to be 'on call' to them whenever they perceive a need to see or speak with you. You need to appear accessible to these people in a controlled manner and set their expectations in terms of a response in accordance with the nature of the interruption.



Using your interruption screens will also help you to assess the level of urgency of interruptions, allowing you to prioritize. For example, you have just secured yourself an hour in an empty meeting room to plan your presentation for the next board meeting.

- Do you answer the beep of a new email?
- Do you look to see who is calling when your phone vibrates?
- Do you ask your PA to check with you before making any diary changes?
- The answer to all these questions is 'No'.

Your schedule is your responsibility to manage and maintain as it is this activity that will most directly affect your productivity.



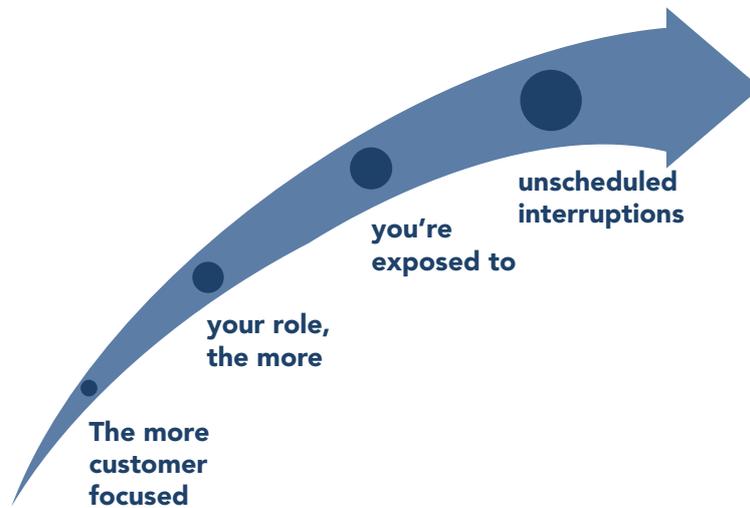
Within this schedule you can designate certain periods of time as being totally protected from interruptions and others where you will tolerate a planned disruption. It is for these latter periods of time that you will need to prioritize when and how to manage the interruptions.

You will have to be very protective of these periods of time and do your utmost to allocate time to resolve issues raised by interruptions into your 'free time' in your diary.

The most effective way to achieve this is by ensuring your schedule clearly shows to anyone who has access to your diary that these periods of time are committed periods and are not open to negotiation by others.

The number and length of these periods will alter depending on your role and organization. The greater degree of 'Customer Focus' your role has, the greater number of unscheduled interruptions you are likely to face due to the nature of your role within the organization.

You will need to strongly defend your protected time in a polite and constructive manner.



In order to protect such periods, you may delegate the prioritizing of such interruptions to senior members of your team or department. You may need to mentor and coach your selected individuals in this role so that your time is properly protected. If your role is more autonomous, you may want to work in conjunction with a colleague where you manage each other's interruptions during protected periods.

### KEY POINTS

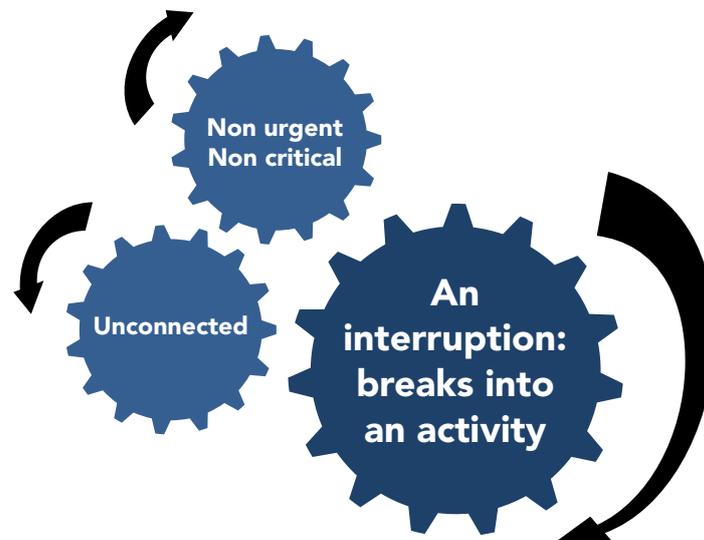
- ✓ It can be difficult to protect yourself from interruptions whilst maintaining a good working relationship with others.
- ✓ Make sure that your diary or schedule clearly identifies your availability.
- ✓ Delegate the responsibility for screening interruptions to a team member if possible.
- ✓ If not, then try to do this with a colleague on a reciprocal basis.

## What Constitutes an 'Interruption'

One can define an interruption as:

*'Something that breaks into an activity.'*

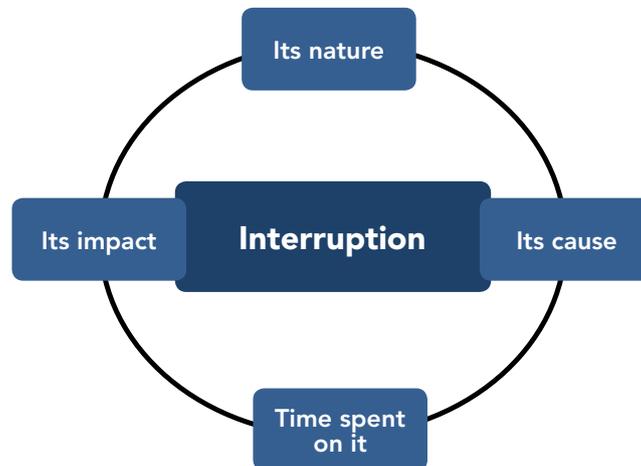
This break is not connected to that activity, nor is it an urgent or critical issue that requires immediate attention.



If your role requires you to complete a time log, it will be easier for you to identify those tasks that distracted you from your objective and the amount of time it took to sort out this disruption. If your time log requires you to detail who instigates or requests such interruptions, you have most of the information you need to determine the cost of such interruptions in terms of time and productivity.

For many managers this information is not readily available, so you will need to create your own time log in order to gather it. This can be a simple note in your diary, PDA, or BlackBerry, which details key facts about the interruption.

Those key facts are:



Once you have a week or two of such data, you will then be able to see if there are any trends to these interruptions.

1. *Is there a pattern emerging? For example, most interruptions are between 10–12pm.*
2. Were they important?
3. How many were inescapable?
4. What proportion of your time was taken up with interruptions?
5. What were the main causes? Was it people or events?

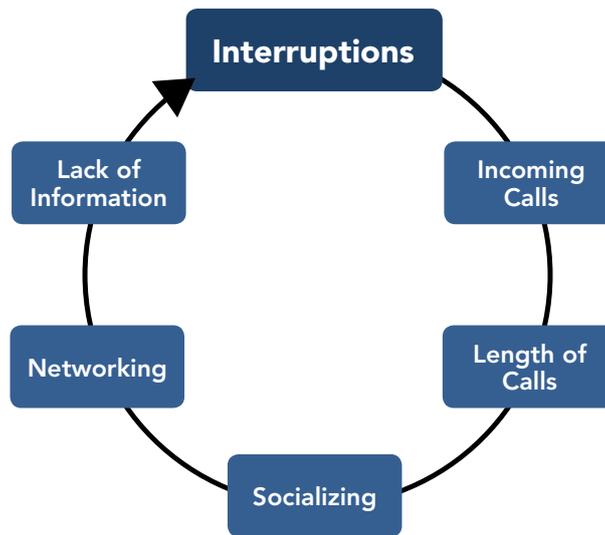
If you can see a pattern to certain types of interruptions, or that a specific person or department is the cause of the majority of them, you will be able to develop a strategy and adopt techniques to alleviate the source of your disruption.

## KEY POINTS

- ✓ Document the sources and reasons for the interruptions you have to deal with.
- ✓ Identify the most disruptive and most frequent.

## How to Counter the Effect of Interruptions

Once you have established the causes of your interruptions, you are then in a position to look at the best way to reduce them. Most typical interruptions are:



There are a variety of simple techniques you can use to help protect your time and productivity.

For many people, incoming calls account for the majority of their interruptions. The most effective technique to deal with these is to use a voicemail facility.

If this is not possible, then you may be able to use secretarial support or a close colleague who is willing to answer your calls whilst you are protecting your time. This strategy is something that you can reciprocate with them so that they too have protected time.

Many of these incoming calls, or texts, will be received on your cell phone. With these calls you can put your cell on silent and call divert so that any calls go directly to your voicemail. Whether your voicemail is on a landline or your cell, the message any caller receives should tell them what time you are able to get back to the caller.

With the emphasis today on management to be customer focused and proactive, the temptation to look at your cell phone is instinctive. To ensure you resist this temptation, make sure the vibrate option is disabled so your phone is completely silent. Also, leave

it in your briefcase or a safe place close to you so that it's not a visible distraction, yet is readily accessible when you have completed your protected period of work.



From your analysis you may find it is not the number of calls you receive but the length of time you spend on each call. This may be as a result of the complexity of the issue being discussed in any one call, which could highlight an underlying issue that needs to be addressed—for example, revised user instructions, service enhancement, etc.

If you have been receiving lengthy calls from a variety of sources concerning the same topic, then a more effective use of your time, and potentially a quicker resolution to the issue, is to organize a meeting with the necessary parties to resolve the issue or address the topic.

It is essential that you develop your own phone technique of quickly assessing the importance and nature of the call. You will also develop your own 'closing call phrases,' which allow you to end the call without causing offence to the caller:

- Sorry but I must go to my customer meeting now ...
- Thank you for raising this issue, I would like some time to think about this and get back to you ...
- I would like to discuss this with my colleague and get back to you ...
- I would like to discuss this with my colleague before I can comment further ...

When you use a closing technique to end a call, you must ensure that you leave the caller with an expectation of when you will get back to them and that you meet this expectation. This technique will not work for very long if you fail to get back to people as promised.

Many callers may just simply be time wasters or be calling you inappropriately; if these are the type of calls your interruptions consist of, then you need to be assertive and put an end to such calls as quickly as possible. Your strategy in this case will be more direct in ending the call, informing the caller you are not the person they need to contact or making sure switchboard puts calls through to the correct person.

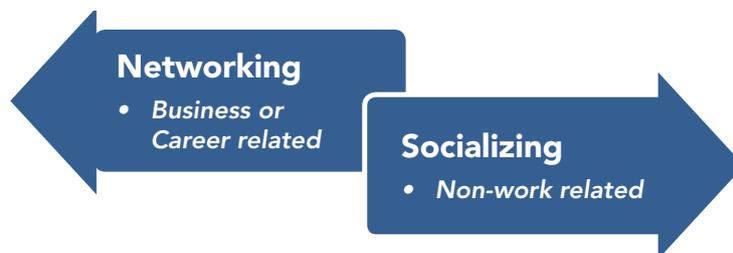
### KEY POINTS

- ✓ Almost everyone would benefit from a strategy for dealing with incoming calls.
  - ✓ Use voicemail or a colleague to field calls whenever possible.
  - ✓ Learn to 'close out' calls quickly when they have achieved their purpose.
  - ✓ Always get back to people when promised or they will keep calling you to check progress.
-

## Inappropriate Socializing, or Networking?

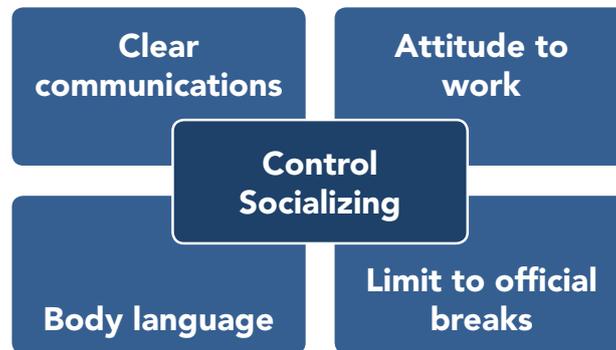
There is a fine line between whether your unscheduled or informal conversation with colleagues is a part of networking or socializing. Many people by nature are sociable, but understanding when this becomes a distraction and disrupts their own productivity or that of their co-workers is often difficult.

The distinction between socializing and networking usually comes down to the topic of the conversation. Generally, if it is work related then it's networking, if it isn't, then it's socializing. The latter conversations are best conducted in your own time—for example, breaks, lunch times, or after work. Networking interruptions, which relate to work or career issues need to be focused and mindful of time constraints.



If these 'socializing' interruptions that come from other workers and colleagues are impacting on your effectiveness, then you must develop your own strategies for limiting their number and length. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is through your body language.

If you are working at your desk then just glance up with your eyes and say something like, 'Sorry give me a minute I must just sort this out.' Carry on working for a few seconds and then say 'I'm right in the middle of something, can I catch up with you later, say lunch-time?' This can feel awkward but you will find that you only need to do it two or three times with each person before they take the hint that you don't have the time to socialize during working hours.



If you feel that this may lead to alienating yourself from your co-workers, then you can prepare them by telling them that you have tight deadlines approaching and that you really need to use every minute of the working day to achieve them. It can also help to make a 'social round' during your lunch break and have a quick chat with people on your team or other co-workers.

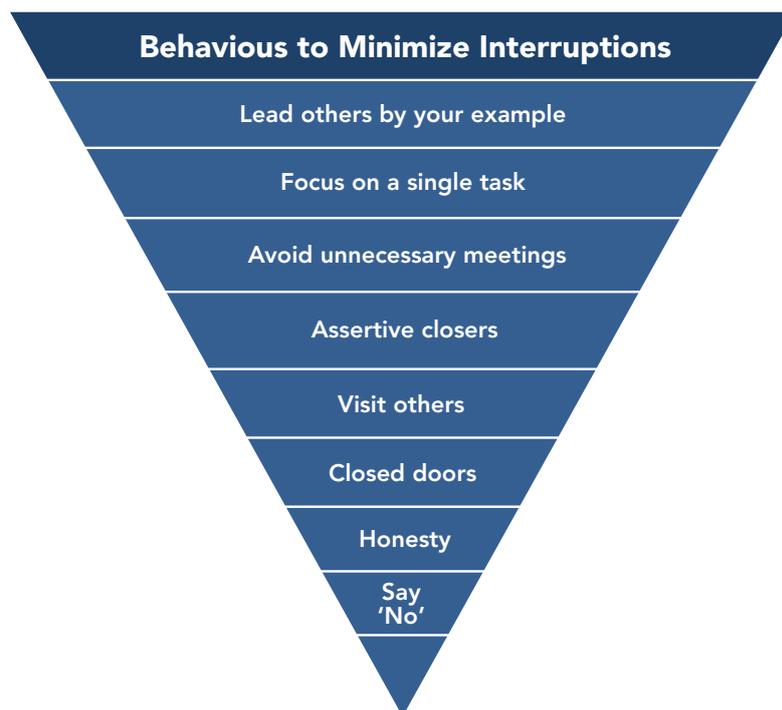
The fact is that people very quickly become accepting of others' working habits. Provided that you are diplomatic, you can be seen as someone who is friendly and approachable but is simply too busy to socialize during the working day.

### KEY POINTS

- ✓ Learn to distinguish between socializing and networking.
- ✓ Try to avoid socializing during core working hours.

## Techniques to Minimize Interruptions

There are some well-known techniques that will help divert interruptions from interfering with your protected periods of time. Many of these are simple to introduce and use in your working practices. You will have to select those most suited to your role and workplace.



As with many management techniques the most important factor to ensure your interruptions are managed and minimized is to be consistent in your approach. You must avoid being pressured or persuaded to relax your chosen barriers, because once you do so, your ability to control your interruptions will be undermined.

**Closed Door**—if you have your own office you can easily create your own protected time by simply closing your door at such times. This erects an extremely effective barrier to social interruptions.

This strategy must be used sparingly so that your colleagues know that if they need to speak to you urgently on an important matter, this barrier is surmountable. If used to excess you will create your own 'Ivory Tower' that others will feel unable to penetrate and you will become less effective as a manager.

**Signs**—Many workplaces have nameplates on each desk for easy identification. If this is true for you then you can use your nameplate to create a barrier to interruptions. If your name is showing you are available, if the back is showing you are unavailable. You could make this clear by putting a sign on the back saying 'please do not disturb.'

By placing this clearly on your desk anyone approaching can easily see whether or not you can be disturbed. The downside of this is that it is easy for others to ignore and you will have to be assertive, yet diplomatic, in how you prevent such interruptions.

**Visit Others**—By visiting your most talkative interrupters, you have more control over the length of your stay. It is important that you have a purpose to your visit and set yourself a time limit. These will keep you focused on your objective for the visit and you will retain control of the conversation.

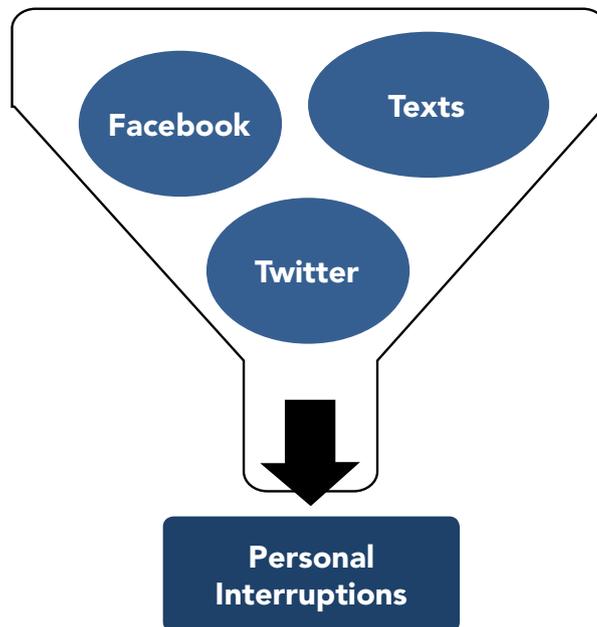
You can also time this to coincide with small breaks such as going to get a drink or something similar, ensuring your productivity is not compromised. Be mindful you don't turn into the interrupter!

**Meetings**—If you know talkative colleagues are part of a meeting, in order to ensure that they don't prolong its length, make sure you have a timed agenda that you adhere to. You must ensure that every meeting you set up or attend has an objective and a desired outcome that you wish to achieve by the end of the meeting. By communicating the latter to all attendees prior to the meeting, you will have set a focused atmosphere.

You can also schedule the meeting so that it precedes another of their commitments or a break period. In this way there is a very compelling reason for all participants to adhere to your timings.

**Assertive Closers**—in an assertive but polite manner inform the person disturbing you that you have a commitment—for example, a report or presentation that you have to finish 'by lunch time' or a specific point in time. In this way you acknowledge them whilst preventing the interruption.

If appropriate, you can also let them know of a time that you are able to discuss their concern. This shows the person that you acknowledge their concern and will deal with it when you are able to focus on it completely.



**Personal Calls and Texts**—modern communications make it appear easy to be available 24/7. But this illusion can be very disruptive, as all our contacts, both friends and colleagues, know they can speak to or contact us at any time. Contact can be in the form of a text, Facebook posting, Twitter message, and many other forms of cyber communication; the list just goes on and on.

There is a simple way to control this type of interruption and that is by ensuring you communicate to all your friends that any personal calls are conducted outside working hours, unless it is an emergency. You need to then act on this principle and not fall into the trap of responding until a non-working break or at the end of the day. In this way we remain focused and efficient in our work.

**Honesty**—Explain to your team or colleagues that you have a heavy schedule and that to complete it all, you must work more effectively and that you will be using these methods in order to give you protected time to work efficiently. Make sure they are aware of when you are available to them to ensure good communications are maintained.

**Single Task Focus**—whilst we all exist in a ‘multi-tasking’ environment and are continually expected to switch back and forth between projects, this is not an effective way to work, as it is too distracting. A more efficient method of working is to complete specific tasks within a project before being diverted to another.

**Avoid Unnecessary Meetings**—meetings for the sake of meetings can be a major interruption to our productivity. To ensure that we only attend those that are necessary, we must first ensure that a meeting is the best way to handle the issue. Could a simple email or call achieve the same objective? If the meeting is necessary does it have a clear objective and are only the essential individuals involved?

**Just say 'No!'**—learning how to say 'No' gracefully is essential for our productivity. Wanting to be a team player is natural for most people so accepting invitations to lunch or casual updates is an easy distraction to succumb to.

The best way to say 'No' is to do so by offering an alternative to the person's request. For example:

*'Can we have lunch on Friday rather than today?'*

*'The project's going well but to keep on track I must finish this; I'll happily update you tomorrow afternoon.'*

**'Practice what you Preach'**—this is one of the most important ways that you can improve productivity within an organization. By not interrupting others without a good reason or as a planned event, you won't be contributing to the overall problem of 'interruptions.'

As a manager you can lead by the example you set to your team and other colleagues. If they see these types of working practices being adopted by you, they will emulate them as we all want to feel part of a team. The ethos of your organization will contribute to differing degrees of your success in this area.

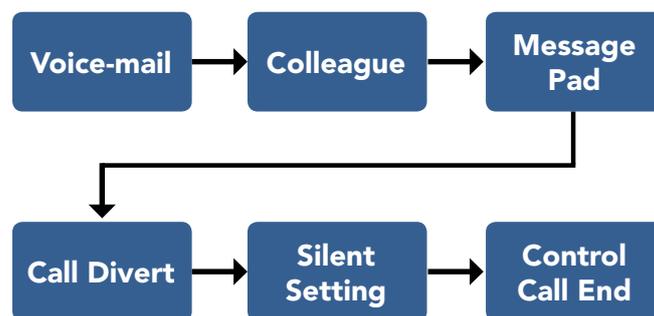
If the nature of your work means that you suffer from many unavoidable interruptions, you will have to be assertive when defending your protected periods of work. Each time you are interrupted you will have to assess whether the nature of the interruption is more important than your current task. It is also important to be conscious of interruptions that you cause to yourself and take steps to eliminate as many of these as possible.

## KEY POINTS

- ✓ Try to make it clear when you don't want to be disturbed. Most people will respect it.
- ✓ Visit others rather than have them visit you. This gives you more control over the length of the meeting.
- ✓ Use a timed agenda in meetings and try to schedule a definite finish time.
- ✓ Be assertive and polite when terminating an interruption.
- ✓ Be honest about the fact that you don't like unnecessary interruptions—most people will either email you or leave socializing until lunchtime or the end of the day.
- ✓ Discourage friends and partners from contacting you at work unless it is a genuine emergency.
- ✓ Avoid attending unnecessary meetings.
- ✓ Don't interrupt others.

## Managing Phone Interruptions

The number of phone calls you receive in any one day can often be one of your major sources of interruptions, with the additional disadvantage that the callers are oblivious to any of the barriers mentioned above or your use of body language.



The most effective way to manage this type of interruption is to make use of the technology that phones provide—for example, voicemail, call divert, and silent settings to name a few.

The key to your success is to ensure that you do your best to reduce these interruptions by phone. Such calls break into your train of thought and destroy your concentration. Not only does this reduce your effectiveness on your current task, more often than not you have to break off totally to solve a problem raised by the interrupting caller, or find information they require.

It is often impossible to reduce your calls completely during your protected periods, so you must expect to have to still handle those requiring your immediate attention. Often the best way to filter your calls is to set up a voicemail on your phone or PDA.

The message your callers receive must be concise and tell them when they can expect you to return their call. The nature of your role will determine whether or not you are able to specify when you will return their call.

To avoid falling into a common trap of voicemails you must keep the message up to date, and must not let your phone go to voicemail all the time. If you leave it on permanently or the majority of the time, people will quickly learn it's a bluff and will find other ways to disturb you. Making yourself available is an essential element of your role; you just need to ensure that you have some control over the interruptions.

An example of an effective voicemail message is:

*'Hi, you're through to Simon's voicemail on Friday, May 12. I'm out of the office until 2:30. Please leave a message after the tone and I'll return your call today. If it is urgent please press "0" and ask for Iona Skelling . . .'*

As this voicemail suggests, another way to manage your call interruptions is to have a mutual arrangement with a colleague where you each take the other's calls if the need arises. You must select your colleague carefully and be sure of their skill and knowledge to handle the call satisfactorily.

A well-designed message pad will ensure that whoever takes the message on your behalf obtains all of the relevant details you need. This message pad also means that all of your messages are kept neatly in one place and are not left scattered over your desk where they could get lost or misplaced.

This is a work practice you could introduce throughout your team or department to ensure all messages are dealt with professionally.

In the example below you can see that all of the essential information you need has been taken down—full name, phone number, reason for call, and any action the caller requires of you.

<i>Message for: Simon</i>		
Urgent	Important	No Action
Date: May 12      Time: 11am		
Callers name: Susan Krawiec		
Pronounced: kraveeatz		
Organization: Blue Chip inc		
Phone Number: 555 343 7659		Mobile Number: 07983 123876
Message: I need to know your preferred method of production for the new prototype ASAP so that I can prepare for the management meeting on Monday.		
Required Action: Let me know before the end of Thursday.		

As part of your working practices, you can make sure that you always adopt an efficient phone manner. This can ensure that you minimize unhelpful small talk with callers and maximize your effectiveness. Your tone of voice and words can convey welcome without encouraging small talk, and maintain the focus of the conversation.

For example:

*'Hi James, good to hear from you, what can I do for you today?'*

If you feel the purpose of the call requires greater attention than the time you have currently available, then arrange to speak or meet at a more convenient time. You can also use this additional time to come to the call better prepared to answer the questions posed in the original call. In this way your caller feels they have been heard and leaves the call satisfied rather than irritated.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of control is how you end your call. It is essential that when your caller puts down their phone, they feel that they have been listened to and that you have taken on board the purpose of their call.



Even once the objective of the call has been achieved, many callers will continue to talk, which now means they have become an interruption to your effectiveness. In this instance, you need to regain control of the call by using each of the three techniques below:

- Make it clear by giving a reason for ending the call—'I'm sorry but I have to go ...'
- Give an explanation why—'... I've got a meeting now ...'
- Keep communications open—'... send me an email if you think of anything else.'

## KEY POINTS

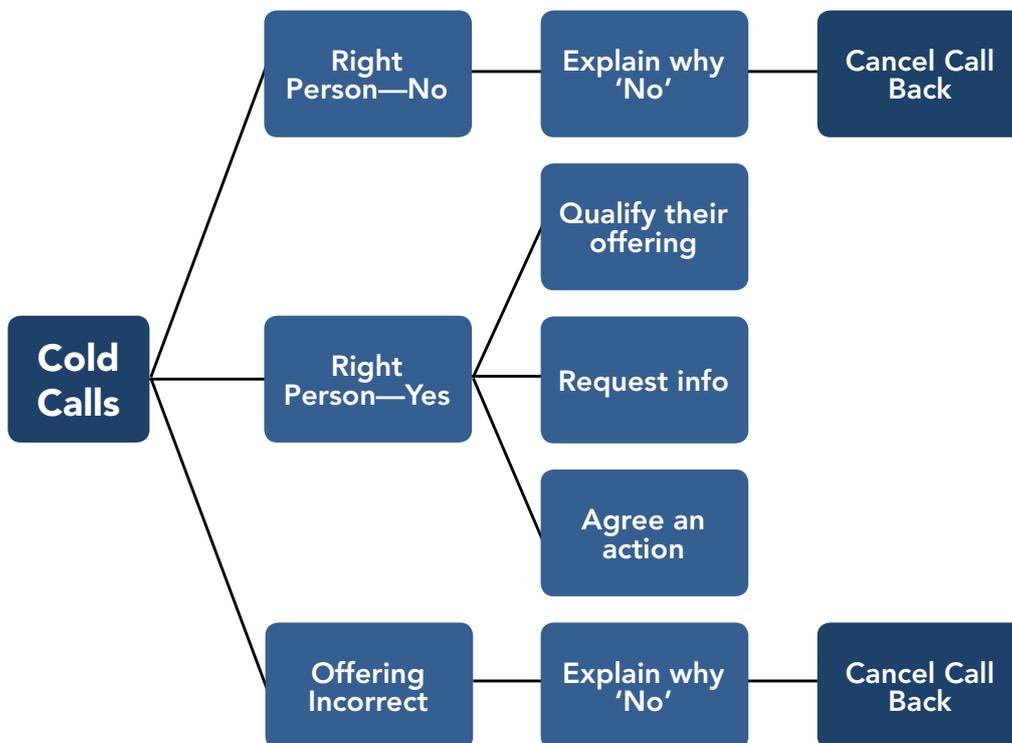
- ✓ Develop a strategy for dealing with incoming calls.
- ✓ Your voicemail message should include a time when you'll get back to the caller and an option for an urgent message.
- ✓ If other people are taking some of your calls then implement a message pad system.
- ✓ Don't let phone calls drag on once their objective has been achieved.

## Handling Cold Calls Effectively

Everyone hates cold callers but they are paid to be persistent so just ending the call as quickly as possible is not going to prevent them calling you again in the future.

To avoid future interruptions it is best to ascertain if what they have to offer is of any use to you. You may also want to get them to call you back at a more convenient time outside of your protected time period.

By asking these few basic questions you may also be able to say whether or not you are the correct person for them to be talking to.



If you are unable to filter such calls by delegating the qualification process to your secretary, or a team member, then you have to devise a 'one-hit' strategy for these types of call.

From the suggested strategies you will be able to adopt those that best suit the industry you are in. The key to reducing repeat calls is to follow through with your promised actions.

- Determine whether or not the product or service is of interest to you.
- Request information to be sent to you and decide on its receipt how you will respond. (Remember you can request at this point to be removed from their mailing list.)
- At the end of the call ask for the caller's details and say you will contact them if you require their product or service in the future.
- Tell them after their explanation why their product or service is not appropriate for you or your organization by giving a valid reason, such as:

*'We already get this service from our sister company...'*

Most cold callers are working to a script and the last item on it usually says something like *'OK, well in that case we'll call you again in six months to see if the situation has changed.'* You must make sure that they understand that this is not what you want to happen, either because,

*You are the wrong person to speak to.*

or,

*They are offering something that is not appropriate.*

**You need to make it crystal clear that you don't expect them to call you back ... ever.**

Colleagues may not always be able to properly qualify these cold calls on your behalf but they can ask the caller to call you back at a time when you are happy to deal with such calls.

In this way you can still keep your protected time productive. It is essential that any messages taken for you contain all of the necessary information, as in the message pad above.

### KEY POINTS

- ✓ Don't 'brush off' cold calls, they will only call you again and again.
- ✓ Get to the bottom of why they are calling you and take appropriate action.

## Managing Your Outbound Calls

Whilst the phone can be a source of major distraction with all the calls you receive, it also an important tool, along with your email, in keeping others informed and up to date as required. If these outgoing calls and emails are not managed effectively, they will also become a major interruption to your effective working.

Making calls and replying to emails is a key part of any management role but you need to adopt strategies that ensure this is done effectively. The simplest way to manage this activity is to block a period of time that is solely for this purpose.

Once you have set a specific time for your calling/emailing, make a list in descending order of importance. Make sure that you aren't over-ambitious with the number of calls you can make or emails you can send during the allocated time.

At the end of each calling period, make sure that you set reminders in your PDA, diary, or calendar of any call-backs or actions. Ensure that all notes you have made, as a result of your calls, are stored somewhere safe and any resulting actions are logged.



To ensure this time is kept to a minimum and that you work through your calls efficiently, you will need to have given some thought to each call and have made a note in your diary, calendar, or PDA as to its purpose. By keeping all the essential information in this one note, you will be able to work methodically and speedily through your necessary calls.

Details required for your outgoing calls:

- Name & Organization.
- Telephone & extension number.
- Name of secretary if appropriate.
- Purpose of call, e.g. monitoring progress of project.
- Any specific issues or questions you need answers to.
- Essential information you must communicate.
- Deadlines or timescales.
- Future action required, if any. For example, email to rest of project team to communicate progress, or to the person you called to confirm outcomes of call.

The benefit of this preparation is that you know exactly what you require from the call and nothing is forgotten which may cause you to have to call the person back. This also ensures that your time spent on the call is as effective as possible as you will know the purpose of the call from the outset.

It also allows you the opportunity to leave a concise and informative message on the person's voicemail or with a colleague. If you are known to the person you have called, you may not need to leave your full name, company, or your phone number—only leave the essential information as appropriate to ensure efficiency.

Make sure that you leave a clear indication of when you can best be contacted, or when you will next call them, so that you don't end up in a circle of message leaving. If applicable, you can ask them to email you with your required information by a certain time and date.

For example:

*'Hello Ross, its Kyle Squires of NCJ on 555 965 367122. I'm calling to ask how our new website design is coming along. Are we still on target for the final designs to be shown at next Tuesday's meeting? Please call me back or email me with an update by the end of today. Thanks Kyle.'*

If the relationship you have with the person is in its early stages, you may prefer to say you will call them back. That way you stay in control and are prepared for the call, rather than being caught unawares or without your notes.

Try to avoid being left on hold as this reduces your efficiency and limits the number of total calls you can make. If you are having difficulty in getting through to a particular person, see if there is a PA, secretary, or colleague you could speak to in order to ascertain the best time to call the person you need to contact, or whether an email may be better. It also gives you the opportunity to express the importance of your call.

### KEY POINTS

- ✓ Plan your outbound calls and do them in batches.
- ✓ If you can't reach someone always leave a well-structured message to avoid a prolonged round of message tennis.
- ✓ Don't waste time being left on hold.

## Managing Emails

The ubiquity of smartphones means that most people are now in the situation where they have emails arriving every few minutes. The problem is that it is impossible to know whether an email is important or trivial without looking at it.

This means that many people now feel obliged to check their phone every time an arriving email announces itself with a bleep or vibration. This is extremely disruptive and explains the incredibly short period of time that people are able to concentrate on a single task, as described in the introduction to this eBook. Ten years ago incoming phone calls would have been the biggest source of interruptions, whereas this has now been overtaken by email.

The only way to avoid being interrupted quite so often is to make it clear to your work colleagues that you check your emails at particular times and if they need an urgent response then they should call you. This is usually quite difficult to get across and you will have to accept that you will upset some people by not replying to their emails straight-away. Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this problem.

There are certain behaviors and useful techniques that you can adopt to ensure your productivity remains high whilst dealing with your emails.



- Have an effective SPAM filter set up and make use of the 'block sender' facility for any unsolicited emails that the filter misses.
- Assign set times (three or four during the day, with the last being just before you plan to leave) to read and respond to emails that are appropriate to your role. Don't look at them every time one lands in your inbox; the only exception to this is when you are expecting a reply that directly effects what you are working on.
- Reply to each email in each session and don't leave any 'unread.'
- The speed and nature of your replies sets expectations. If your co-workers start to see you consistently returning emails within hours rather than seconds, they will tend to back off on the stream of requests and will often bother someone else or find the information themselves.
- Move emails to an appropriate file or delete them to keep your inbox clear.

Since emails are now the single biggest cause of interruptions, and almost half of the interruptions people suffer are self-inflicted, it is worth asking yourself whether your own behavior is having a negative impact on your productivity. Many people know instinctively that they are checking their emails too often but they feel unable to stop doing so.

The popular press and media have run stories on 'smartphone addiction' and it has become something of a cliché. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that many people don't feel completely in control of how often they check incoming messages. Rather than dismiss this, it is worth considering whether there is any psychological basis as to why this may be happening.

Operant conditioning is a form of learning during which an individual modifies the occurrence and form of their own behavior due to the reinforcement of consequences of that behavior. Operant conditioning is so called because it deals with the modification of voluntary (operant) behavior. Positive reinforcement occurs when a response is followed by a stimulus that is rewarding, increasing the frequency of the behavior.

It has been proven experimentally that if you want to train an animal to do something, consistently rewarding that behavior is not the best way. Instead, the most effective training regime is one where you only occasionally give the animal a reward, and then only at random intervals. This is called 'variable interval reinforcement.'

As you know from your own experience, most emails are fairly trivial but occasionally you will receive one that is rewarding in some way. This may be nothing to do with work; it could be a social invitation, something really funny, or some other piece of good news.



Checking your email will eventually get you one of these rewards and because you never know which occasion you check will produce the reward, constant checking is reinforced, even if most of the time it turns out to have been worthless. You still check because you never know when the reward will come. This is a perfect example of 'variable interval reinforcement.'

This is the psychological basis of the constant email checking that you can observe in any office, on the train, or anywhere where people with email can access the Internet. Far from being a trivial problem, it is becoming recognized as a real productivity killer because it prevents you from focusing one hundred percent on a task for any meaningful length of time.

If you feel that your email checking behaviour is having a negative impact on your productivity, then you need to take action to correct it, as it is unlikely to correct itself. Remember, most emails just aren't that important.

Typically, over half of your emails will be just passing information, about a third will require some action on your part, and maybe 10-20 percent will need some sort of concerted action. Maybe one in a hundred will represent some sort of 'reward' and it will still be there when you eventually get to it.



As it is so difficult to ignore incoming emails, the best thing is to close your email application completely. If this is not possible, then turn off cell phone alerts and keep your email application minimized. Given the amount of emails that you receive, it is usually necessary to have an organized system for dealing with them in batches, as just 'checking' it seldom achieves very much.

## KEY POINTS

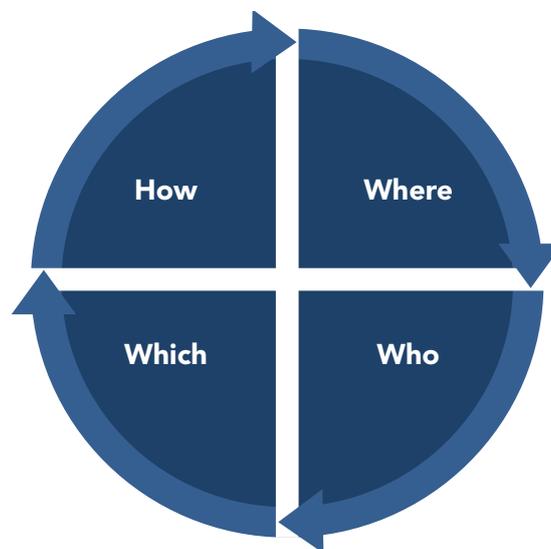
- ✓ Take control of your incoming emails—don't constantly react to them.
- ✓ Use technology to screen out the worst time wasters.
- ✓ Beware of being conditioned to constantly check your messages.

## Knowing Where to Get Information

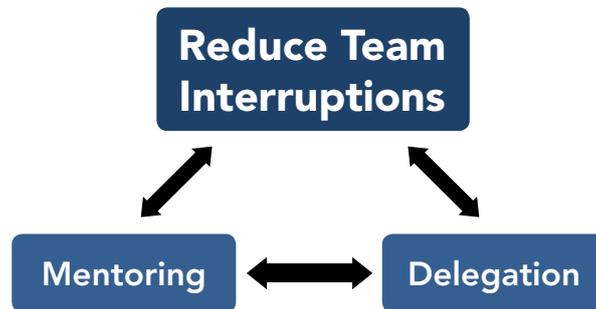
Familiarizing yourself with 'where' and 'how' to retrieve files and information that you will need to perform your role will ensure that you are not interrupted by having to find someone who knows where or how to get the information you require. Knowing 'who' can best help you to the information or data you need will also greatly improve your efficiency.

For those managers with secretaries or personal assistants, this efficient handling of information will be a matter of teamwork and working in a manner that complements both your needs. Between you, you will develop a comprehensive filing system that guarantees easy retrieval of information as and when you require it—for example, a cell phone number of a major customer.

Knowing how to access this sort of information will enable you to find it whether or not your secretary is available. This knowledge avoids wasting time locating your secretary to ask for the required number and ensures the efficient use of your time.



Make sure you are aware of what information can be obtained from different departments and from particular individuals so that you are able to acquire the data you need swiftly and efficiently. Identifying those individuals who have a talent for 'knowing' where and who to get information from will greatly enhance your internal networking. This can operate formally or informally, whichever best suits your needs.



Interruptions created within your team can be avoided through the appropriate use of delegation and mentoring. You may choose to give responsibility for collating and maintaining certain data to a team member. By doing this, your team can operate more efficiently as they will not need to interrupt you and the data is easily accessible to you when needed.

## Other Free Resources

The Free Management eBooks website offers you over 100 free resources for your own professional development. Our eBooks, Checklists, and Templates are designed to help you with the management issues you face every day. They can be downloaded in PDF, Kindle, ePub, or Doc formats for use on your iPhone, iPad, laptop or desktop.

**eBooks**—Our free management eBooks cover everything from accounting principles to business strategy. Each one has been written to provide you with the practical skills you need to succeed as a management professional.

**Templates**—Most of the day-to-day management tasks you need to do have already been done by others many times in the past. Our management templates will save you from wasting your valuable time re-inventing the wheel.

**Checklists**—When you are working under pressure or doing a task for the first time, it is easy to overlook something or forget to ask a key question. These management checklists will help you to break down complex management tasks into small controllable steps.

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