

HOW LEARNING
PROFESSIONALS CAN

Keep Technology Distractions at Bay

Tech-related distractions and interruptions rob us of time, energy, and concentration, increasing stress and decreasing productivity. Learning and performance professionals can use the tools of their own trade to reduce distractions caused when technology takes over the workplace.

The opportunity to tackle a new, complex, and costly learning project is exciting, but it also means that the pressure is on. You try to get down to business, but find your senses assaulted by a horde of visual and aural distractions—ringing landlines, blaring cell phones, buzzing printers and faxes, and droning conversations in every cubicle.

Each flash and beep on your computer or phone signifies yet another email, voicemail, wall post, text, or

tweet, and they're all screaming, "Check me now! Respond to me!" To block out the distractions, it can be tempting to lose yourself in an online game or a soothing podcast. But then how do you find the willpower to get back to work?

It is estimated that interruptions consume 28 percent of the average workday and cost companies more than \$650 billion a year, according to the business research firm Basex. Distractions and interruptions are not only

irritating. They reduce the rate and accuracy of tasks completed, and impede creative and analytical thinking. The result? Low satisfaction with work, high levels of frustration, and ripple effects that interfere with sustained, positive work relationships.

How can you stop feeling overwhelmed in the face of constant competition for your attention? How can you influence others to be more considerate when using technological devices during business?

Take yourself on as a client

To keep distractions at bay, take action by applying the skills and strategies you use when helping others to improve productivity. Consider the acronym PAL, which stands for "plan, act, lead." Even if becoming your own PAL sounds corny, try on this three-step PAL training process to address workplace distractions.

Plan. Assess your needs, identify the costs and benefits, and then select a goal and a monitoring method:

- Assess how much the use of technological devices interrupt you and impede your productivity. For example, how many minutes or hours do you lose each day due to workplace distractions? How or when are you most vulnerable?
- Identify the costs and benefits for your “keeping distractions at bay” project. First, estimate the performance costs of distraction. For example, estimate the time and money costs of procrastination, interrupted thinking, incomplete or inaccurate work, and so on. Next, list the personal costs such as frustration, irritation, or stress. Last, note the benefits of a nondistracting work situation in which you have time for creative and analytical thought.
- Specify a goal that includes the amount of work to accomplish, plus some time for monitoring, within an uninterrupted period.

Act. Implement strategies and gather feedback on your progress so that you move from intention to action. Protect against self-generated distractions:

- Impose an electronic lockdown. Turn off or silence all hi-tech gadgets for at least 20 minutes each day. This gives you protected time to foster problem solving and creative or analytical thinking.
- Abide by routines that support your goals. For example, if work conditions allow, check email and voicemail only two or three times each day.
- Take frequent mini-breaks (no more than 10 minutes) to prevent overload and restore energy and focus.
- Control your attention with positive self-talk and visualization. When your impulse is to grab your cell phone, say to yourself, “I need to control interruptions and keep working.” Then create a mental image of a completed task. You’ll find yourself resuming work quickly.
- Assert yourself. You have the right to insist on ample time to complete

tasks. Identify times during which you are unavailable. Post a message on your automatic email or voicemail response, such as, “I’m working on a deadline. Please leave a message.”

- Recognize and reinforce the considerate behavior of those co-workers who *don’t* interrupt you with excessive or meaningless communication.
- Set options on your social networking profiles to prevent overload from unwanted contacts. Social networking should help, not hinder, your work or career.

Lead. Model the behaviors that lead the way for others to keep distractions at bay:

- Discuss “distractions” as a significant problem that can inhibit career development and damage morale.
- Identify specific needs and suggest solutions, for example, designate a “work zone” where staff can do their work under non-distracting conditions.
- With peers and supervisors, generate a set of etiquette and ethics policies to reduce the disastrous effects of technology-related overuse, especially when prioritizing and scheduling communication.
- Be a role model. Alert others as to when you will engage in and respond to messages or calls; demonstrate that you needn’t pick up every time the phone rings or an email, text, or tweet arrives.

Address the barriers

Although you have a plan, some strategies, and motivation, can you move from good intentions to positive action? Certain underlying barriers may sabotage your best efforts to change habits, both personally and professionally.

On a personal level.

- You might deny overusing and/or abusing technological devices yourself, lacking awareness that they’re controlling you instead of the other way around.

- You might fear missing something or disappointing people, buying into the misconception that if technology allows you to be available to everyone 24/7, you should be.

On a workplace or cultural level.

- You might accept without question the myth of multitasking, despite research indicating that it’s an inefficient, error-prone way to work.
- You might feel pressure to conform to the office culture even if it increases your stress and reduces your productivity. What will co-workers and supervisors think if you create boundaries?

When you encounter these barriers, remember that research does support your decision to reduce technology-related overuse and abuse, and decrease interruptions on the job. Also acknowledge that setting boundaries for yourself and others helps you to align your actions with your deepest values and priorities.

Although the same devices that save you time and energy can also bombard you with distractions, you have more control than you think when you apply the knowledge and skills of your profession. Your expertise and professional pride make you uniquely qualified to lead the way.

Instead of feeling scattered, wasting time, and making costly errors, you’ll stem the tide of unneeded distractions. More than that, you’ll enhance performance and productivity, reduce stress, and increase feelings of satisfaction at work.

Geraldine Markel is an educational psychologist and specialist in learning and performance and principal of *Managing Your Mind Coaching & Seminars*. She is the author of *Defeating the 8 Demons of Distraction*; geri@managingyourmind.com.

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