



GET YOUR TIME BACK

INTERRUPTIONS: HOW TO TAME ONE OF THE WORST OFFICE PRODUCTIVITY KILLERS





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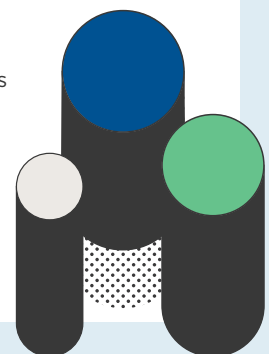
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ABOUT GFOA

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) represents over 21,000 public finance officers throughout the United States and Canada. GFOA's mission is to advance excellence in government finance. GFOA views its role as a resource, educator, facilitator, and advocate for both its members and the governments they serve and provides best practice guidance, leadership, professional development, resources and tools, networking opportunities, award programs, and advisory services.

ABOUT THE RETHINKING BUDGETING PROJECT

Local governments have long relied on incremental, line item budgeting where last year's budget becomes next year's budget with changes around the margin. Though this form of budgeting has its advantages and can be useful under circumstances of stability, it also has important disadvantages. The primary disadvantage is that it causes local governments to be slow to adapt to changing conditions. The premise of the "Rethinking Budgeting" initiative is that the public finance profession has an opportunity to update local government budgeting practices to take advantage of new ways of thinking, new technologies, and to better meet the changing needs of communities. The Rethinking Budgeting initiative will seek out and share unconventional, but promising methods for local governments to improve how they budget.



In today's workplace, technology has reduced the cost of communication to essentially zero.

While there are many benefits to open communication, there is also a cost: We experience more interruptions during the workday. One inquiry into workplace interruptions found the following:¹

- **The average worker experiences seven interruptions per hour.**
- **They spend about five minutes dealing with the typical interruption.**
- **About 80% of these interruptions were described as adding little or no value.**

That means that many people are spending up to three hours per day dealing with low- or no-value interruptions. This seems to be true for GFOA members too. A poll conducted by GFOA showed over a quarter of respondents rated interruptions as the most annoying source of lost time at work, making it the second most annoying source behind meetings.

Saying that people spend up to three hours a day with interruptions understates the problem. Because interruptions occur at unpredictable times, we are constantly forced to break concentration to deal with them. It can take up to 25 minutes to reach full concentration and get into the flow of a task.² Hence, some people may be spending their entire workday in a chronically distracted state, never reaching full concentration. Studies in academia show the insidious implications of chronic distraction: Students who are regularly distracted have much lower GPAs and exam scores than more focused students.³

We can assume that chronic distraction will not produce better results in the office than it does in the classroom. This is a problem for public finance officers because much of public finance work—such as preparing budgets, forecasts, and month- and year-end closings—requires concentration.

One might think that a solution to this problem could be to get better at multitasking. However, people are *not capable of true multitasking* (i.e., working on more than one thing at a time). Instead, what we think of as multitasking is rapid switching of our attention between different tasks. As we saw earlier, it takes time to ramp up to full concentration, so rapid attention shifting is little or no better than a chronic distraction. Research shows that multitasking could cut productivity by up to 40%!^{4,5} In a cruel twist, people who think they are good multitaskers and who multitask often are worse at it than people who spend more time in a focused state.⁶ People who focus have trained their brain to operate efficiently. Multitaskers are training themselves to be constantly distracted with its consequent effects on cognitive ability.



GET YOUR TIME BACK CHALLENGE

To help GFOA members get time back in their day, we are introducing the *Get Your Time Back Challenge*. The challenge asks participants to try strategies like we describe in this paper and report back the results. Lessons learned will be shared with the GFOA membership, and participants will be recognized for their achievements.

Visit gfoa.org/get-your-time-back for details on how to participate.

The solution is to limit interruptions to provide more time for focused work. This will not be easy. Fortunately, research has provided us with insights on how to limit interruptions. Before we get into the strategies for limiting interruptions, we need to recognize two distinct types of interruptions because the strategies dealing with each are distinct.

The first is interruption from people, such as when a co-worker calls us or comes to our workspace for a spontaneous conversation. This is probably the most obvious source of interruption for many of us. The second is interruption from technology. This is when we are distracted by notifications from our computer or smartphone—or when we interrupt our workflow to check messages or visit a social media application. Let's see how to deal with these two types of interruptions.

Interruptions From People

The health care field offers illuminating experiences about interruptions. In a hospital, nurses are responsible for administering medications to patients. Nurses are regularly interrupted during this task by doctors or other nurses who want their attention. To illustrate, one study showed that almost all the 56 medication events the researchers observed were interrupted, and there were almost two interruptions per event.⁷ These interruptions induce errors. The same study showed that just over one-third of the interrupted medication events had at least one procedural failure. This can be serious, as the patient could get the wrong dosage or the wrong medication. Because these interruptions are a matter of life or death, the medical field has put a lot of thought into interventions to eliminate or mitigate interruptions, which we describe on the following pages.⁸ The results have been impressive. One study showed a single intervention reduced error rates by 20% to 50%.⁹ If these interventions work in a hectic hospital setting, it stands to reason that they could work in a public finance office as well.



Multitasking is Not all Bad.

Multitasking can work when the tasks involved do not require much cognitive effort, like folding laundry and watching TV. Mundane office work could also be successfully multitasked.



Designate a certain part of the office as a no-interruption zone.

Staff education. Many people may not be aware of the serious consequences interruptions and distractions have for productivity. For example, recall that multitasking is a myth, yet many people still try to do it, and some believe they are good at it. Consider sharing this paper with your colleagues and having a conversation about what you can do together to reduce interruptions. Furthermore, if your colleagues are aware of the consequences of interruptions, they are more likely to see your attempts to avoid interruptions as a well-meaning attempt to be productive and not as antisocial!

Physical spaces that are no-interruption zones. Designate a certain part of the office as a no-interruption zone. Allow staff to move there when they need to concentrate on a critical task. Ideally, the no-interruption zone should be a private office, as people in cubicles tend to get almost one-third more interruptions.¹⁰

If your office does not have the space for a no-interruption zone, consider if an off-site location can substitute. For example, perhaps a space at the local library can be used when intense focus is needed, or a work-from-home option could be provided. Another option could be to create temporary no-interruption zones within your existing space. Staff could block out times on shared calendars for important tasks just as they would for a meeting. During this time, their workspace becomes a no-interruption zone.

There are a few pointers for making no-interruptions zones work at their best. First, beware of the “boy who cried wolf” problem: If someone regularly shows a large portion of his or her calendar as a no-interruption zone, the zone may lose credibility and people will interrupt it. Hence, people should limit the use of the zone to when it is most needed. Second, when you use a no-interruption zone, be specific about your reasons. For example, if your calendar message describes the task you are working on, then your colleagues will understand why you can’t be interrupted and will be more likely to respect the zone. Finally, combine the no-interruption zone with the visual indicators intervention described on the following page.

Do-not-disturb visual indicators. Establish visual signals for staff who are not to be interrupted. Get everyone's commitment to respect these signals. These signals could be virtual, like a do-not-disturb status on a phone system. Signals could also be physical. For example, Gwen Pilo, the Finance Director for the City of SeaTac, Washington, turned her office into a no-interruption zone by closing the door and putting up a simple sign (combined with blocking time on her calendar). For people who work in a cubicle, wearing noise-cancelling headphones could also be a do-not-disturb signal.

Systematic solutions. Identify common sources of interruptions, then design solutions around that particular problem. For example, a larger finance office had one staff person who we'll call Mary. Mary was regularly interrupted by questions from other departments because she gave the most helpful answers of all the finance staff. A systematic solution could be to play to Mary's natural strengths. Mary's role could be changed so that helping other departments becomes a primary job responsibility and not just a distraction. After all, mistakes that other departments make will often have to be fixed by the finance department later. Further, if departments first call other finance staff and get unsatisfactory responses before turning to Mary, then the finance department is enduring no-value interruptions in addition to what Mary experiences. In exchange, tasks that Mary was doing that were most at risk for critical errors due to interruption could be shifted to staff members who were not as skilled at dealing with questions from departments.



Once we start something, we feel more compelled to finish it compared to when we hadn't started it at all.

Systematic solutions can also take place within an individual's work. For example, many people tend to have the greatest energy at the start of the workday and then lose energy and the ability to focus near the end. Hence, a systematic solution would be to reserve mornings for important work that requires focus and open up the afternoon for meetings, urgent tasks that aren't important but are distracting, and other activities that have the potential to break your concentration.

Another simple systematic solution would be to practice a strategy of sticking with whatever task you are on until you complete it or at least reach a satisfying milestone that provides a natural break point. Unfinished tasks can elicit the "Zeigarnik effect." If you've ever started a household project, stopped partway through, and then felt compelled to complete it, you've experienced the Zeigarnik effect. Once we start something, we feel more compelled to finish it compared to when we hadn't started it at all. Thus, an unfinished task can cause us to interrupt ourselves as our mind continues to go back to the unfinished task.

Finally, flextime could be used to avoid interruptions. The hours between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. will always be the most prone to interruption. Flextime could allow employees to move some of their work time outside of traditional business hours. Trish Davidson, Finance Director for Rockingham County, Virginia, observed that when she comes to the office at 6 a.m., the couple of hours she spends working before regular business hours are more productive than the entire rest of her day!

Checklists. Not all interruptions can be eliminated; therefore, an anti-interruption strategy should consider how to mitigate the negative impacts of an interruption when one does occur. A good checklist can help. A good checklist is not an exhaustive listing of everything that must be done to complete a task. Instead, a good checklist fits on one page and skips the obvious or unimportant steps. It focuses on the critical steps in a process that are likely to be overlooked and are not adequately checked by other mechanisms.¹¹ These are the biggest points of potential failure. Thus, the checklist helps users reorient themselves to the task if an interruption throws them off.

Preparation. Another way to mitigate the effects of interruption is to prepare the workspace so it is optimally organized. This makes it easier to pick the task back up after an interruption. “5S” is a popular tool from Lean process improvement¹² that guides how to organize a workplace. Each of the five S’s represents a different step in the organizing process: Sort the necessary from unnecessary, set in order so the most important work tools are easy to find and accessible, shine or keep the workspace clean and free of distracting clutter, standardize the approach so it can be replicated, and sustain over time. 5S has been widely used by governments that practice Lean. There are many internet resources on how to use 5S, and you don’t have to be a full-fledged Lean organization to benefit from it. Also, 5S is useful beyond mitigating the impact of interruptions. For example, the City of Chula Vista, California’s municipal finance department, did an officewide 5S project and was able to improve productivity so much that they were able to cut two vacant half-time administrative positions.



QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS ABOUT INTERRUPTIONS FROM PEOPLE

- Are your colleagues aware of the potential for lost productivity from interruptions and chronic distractions? How can you get them on board with combating distraction?
- Can you designate a no-interruption zone that staff can use for tasks that demand focus?
- Can your office agree on signals that staff can display to indicate they should not be disturbed?
- What are your important sources of interruption? How can you mitigate those?
- Do you have checklists and a good organizational system to help you pick critical tasks back up after being interrupted?

Email is one of the top sources of distraction in the workplace.



Interruptions From Technology

Interruptions from technology are different than those from people. They are generated automatically by software or by people who aren't usually expecting an immediate response (e.g., text messages, email). This is different from a phone call and, especially, in-person interruption, where the other person is expecting you to respond right away.

One might think this would mean that interruptions from technology would be easily tamed. This is not the case. Email is one of the top sources of distraction in the workplace. The reason interruptions from technology are challenging is because excessively checking text messages, emails, etc., has developed into a *habit* for many of us. Much of what we do is driven by habit. For example, researchers found that over half of tasks performed at work were habitual.¹³ Habits proceed without much conscious thought. We have habits because they relieve us of the need to spend energy thinking about routine tasks.

Sometimes we make habits of undesirable behaviors. Recognizing excessive or unproductive use of technology as a bad habit is important for two reasons. First, it reveals that we are unlikely to be successful at curtailing this problem just through force of will. Attempting to override a habit simply by resolving to do things differently is difficult. Conscious, intentional thought requires substantial effort. Habits require little effort. Hence, good intentions are at a disadvantage against habit, as the struggles of people who vow to quit smoking demonstrates.

The second reason why recognizing "device-checking" as a habit is important is that it allows us to take advantage of research on how to change habits. In *Good Habits, Bad Habits: The Science of Making Positive Changes That Stick*, Dr. Wendy Wood of the University of Southern California identifies four levers for habit change:¹⁴

- **Friction:** Make it easier to do the right thing; make it harder to do the wrong thing. This may be the single most important lever for habit change.
- **Context:** Our environment provides cues that prompt us to engage in our habits. Change the environment to increase constructive cues and decrease unhelpful cues.
- **Rewards:** Provide an incentive to engage in desirable behavior(s). The reward needs to be received as soon as possible after engaging in the desired activity.
- **Repetition:** Keep doing the right thing until the behavior becomes automatic.

Mitigating technology interruptions requires counteracting the habit-forming features of our devices and applications.



In many cases, the creators of our devices and applications have designed them to become habitual. The interfaces are easy to use or “frictionless.” They cue us with audio tones or visual displays to open the application. We are rewarded by the novelty associated with seeing the latest post on social media, what is happening in the news, etc. Hence, we repeatedly access the technology and it becomes a habit.

Thus, mitigating technology interruptions requires counteracting the habit-forming features of our devices and applications. The easiest place to start is with context and cues. Dr. Wood points out that the most effective way to eliminate cues that would prompt you to put down the task at hand and pick up your smartphone (or other devices) is to leave your phone behind. For example, if you are meeting with a colleague, leave your phone in your office. You will be more focused in the meeting, and your colleague will likely appreciate your undivided attention. Of course, it will not always be possible to escape your devices. Fortunately, most devices and applications have options that allow you to customize notifications. Look for cues your devices are giving you to engage in low- or no-value activity and turn them off. Examples include:

- **Audio or visual notifications of new email messages.** Today, people do not often use email for urgent communications. Hence, it is not necessary to drop what you are doing to check messages.
- **News notifications on your smartphone.** Many applications push news alerts to our phones. This news is almost never so important that learning about it can’t wait.
- **Set up temporary blocks for low-priority contacts.** Smartphones can have customizable do-not-disturb settings, where the phone only notifies you of calls and messages from certain people. For example, you could create a setting that only notifies you of calls/messages from key elected officials.¹⁵

Friction may be the most important lever. The goal is to make it just hard enough to access the distraction that accessing it would require conscious effort. This takes you out of the realm of habit. There are many ways to do this. For example, the author of this paper has placed his phone charger on the other side of the room and plugs the phone in when he gets to work. The phone is thus out of easy reach for the day but not so far away that it couldn't be accessed if needed. When traveling, the phone is kept in a zippered backpack instead of on the author's person, making it slightly more difficult to get to. There are countless ways you can add helpful friction to your technology:

- Michele Cassaro, Deputy Director of Finance and Administration for the Greater Rockford Airport Authority deleted distracting apps entirely from her mobile device. That way she can't be cued to use the apps when using her device for productive purposes. Also, removing these apps would force the user to access them via a personal computer, which might be enough friction to stop a habit.
- Remove the ability to access distracting applications quickly, such as taking them off shortcut menus, etc. This might be especially useful for PCs and email in particular. For instance, Gwen Pilo of SeaTac removed the email shortcut from her desktop and now only opens and checks email at the start of the day, once in the middle of the day, and at the end of the day.
- Sarah Rathlisberger, finance manager for the City of Monticello, Minnesota, stores her cell phone in a desk drawer. She can hear the phone ring (which is more likely to indicate something urgent) but can't as easily hear (or see) the less important notifications her phone produces. Also, because she can't see the phone, the mere sight of the phone can't cue her to pick it up and use distracting apps, etc.
- Develop complex passwords for social media sites, and don't set up the password to be automatically filled in for you. Besides reducing the chances your profile will be hacked, you will have to look up the password every time you want to use social media, likely cutting down on your use of it.
- Use an app that blocks you from visiting certain sites. For example, if you find yourself spending too much time on sites that are not productive, you can set the app to prevent you from visiting the site entirely or limit your time on the site.
- "Turn devices off when not in use. Besides saving battery life, having to turn your device back on to get a quick look at it will often be enough friction to stop a habit.

The goal is to make it just hard enough to access the distraction that accessing it would require conscious effort.

Dr. Wood shows that you can also use friction more creatively. For example, perhaps you pick up your phone to check the time and then end up (wasting time) on a social media app. Get a wristwatch that you like. Now, you've reduced the friction associated with checking the time (just lift your wrist) and you've removed the cue for getting into social media. You might also build a new habit of making personal phone calls. Dr. Wood suggests making a phone call every time you access your phone. Family members or friends will often appreciate a quick call just to

say “hello,” and many work matters are often better resolved over the phone than by email. Besides strengthening your relationships, making these calls adds a new source of friction to using your phone. Phone calls are more difficult than texts or email, so if you make it a habit to make a call every time you pick up your phone, then you are less likely to pick up your phone in the first place!

Finally, we come to rewards and repetition. Repetition is self-explanatory. Reward is more complicated. The reward needs to be immediate in order to work. Dr. Wood suggests that because we use devices as a distraction and distractions are occasionally necessary, then a more constructive distraction could be a viable reward. For instance, keeping a good book or magazine nearby to reach for instead of your device would likely do more for your well-being than the latest news alert or social media post. Furthermore, a physical book or magazine can't bombard you with personalized advertisements that are optimized to grab your attention or present links to lead you down rabbit holes you are better off staying out of. And, of course, if we enjoy the book or the magazine, then it is a good reward for staying off our devices. Rewards could also be intrinsic. For example, there are proven health risks associated with multitasking, including decreased cognitive ability, reduced memory, greater stress, and increased anxiety and susceptibility to depression.¹⁶ Knowing that you are improving your health and well-being by avoiding chronic distraction could be its own reward.



QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY INTERRUPTIONS

- Are you bringing your devices with you to places where they do more harm by creating interruptions than they add in productivity? Can you stop bringing your device?
- What cues to engage in low- or no-value activity are your devices giving you? Can you eliminate those cues?
- What device or applications are your biggest source of distraction? How can you make using that device or app more difficult?
- What cues prompt you to pick up your device (e.g., wanting to know the time)? Can you find a lower friction, less distracting way to achieve the desired result (e.g., wear a wristwatch)?
- Is there a more positive habit (e.g., calling people personally) that you can associate with your device use that also adds to the friction of using the device?
- What immediate reward can you set up for engaging in more constructive behaviors?

Conclusion

Interruptions are a serious threat to productivity. Recognizing the two types of interruptions, those from people and those from technology, allows us to develop strategies to deal with each. Share this paper with your colleagues and develop a plan for your office to reduce the consequences of interruptions. Here is a simple meeting format you could use:

- The first 10 minutes or so are spent on people silently reading the paper. This way everyone starts with the same information. Often, you can't count on people reading ahead of time, so you can have the reading time in the meeting itself.
- Next, participants spend a few minutes, on their own, making notes about their top ideas for reducing the impact of interruptions in the office. These could be ideas from the paper that they liked or ideas they come up with on their own. Research shows that quiet reflection time improves the number and quality of ideas you get from a meeting.
- If you have a lot of participants in this meeting, you could break into groups of four and have people discuss what is on their lists. They can look for commonalities between everyone's list. Those commonalities would be the obvious ideas to commit to. The group could also agree to things that weren't on everyone's list. This group discussion should not take more than 10 minutes. You can then compare notes between the groups. Ideas that were on all the groups' lists would be top candidates, but it would be fine for the meeting participants to agree to ideas that not every group came up with. If you have a smaller number of total participants, you can follow the same process but without multiple groups.
- Wrap up the meeting by writing on a flip chart the new behaviors you and your colleagues will commit to in the future. It could be that too many ideas are generated by the group discussion, potentially being too overwhelming to implement. If this happens, write all the ideas on the flip chart and use "dotmocracy" or some other method of prioritizing. For dotmocracy, every person gets sticky dots. The number of ideas on the flip chart divided by three is usually a good rule of thumb for the number of dots. Participants then put their dots by their favorite ideas. Ideas with more dots win.

Finally, consider joining GFOA's [Get Your Time Back Challenge](#) to share your experiences with other people.

ENDNOTES

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