

BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

With so many interruptions, it's hard to get any work done

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The Army once had a famous advertising slogan that went, "We do more before 9 a.m. than most people do all day." My guess is that the Army figured out long ago what most of us don't learn until we work in an office: you can get a lot more done when there's no one around to bug you.

One Tuesday evening, before leaving the office, I jammed my briefcase full of drawings, notes, and a CD containing project files and office e-mails I might need while stranded on the deserted island I like to call my house.

Feeling overwhelmed by a looming project deadline, I decided to spend Wednesday working from home. With the wife at work and the kids at school, I took advantage of a day's worth of peace and quiet to get more work done in seven hours than I normally accomplish in 40 hours at the office.

I was focused and productive. Save for a single phone call by someone pressuring me to purchase meat products, I worked like gangbusters without any interruptions.

According to an article in *The Financial Express* entitled "Time Bandits in the Workplace," on a regular day the average Joe is interrupted during work about four times an hour. Add that up and you're looking at 32 interruptions per day, 80 percent of which are considered trivial by time-management experts.

In order to get any solid, thorough work done in the office, you have to come in early or stay late. Those are the golden hours for sustained thought. In the *Financial Express* article, author Simran Bhargava writes, "One hour of effort is worth more than two hours of interrupted work."

It's hard to get anything done in the office between 9 and 5. I don't mean to imply that I sit attentively at my desk all day, minding my own business while co-workers mosey up every few minutes to bother me. While partly true, I'm also guilty of frequently and unexpectedly popping by desks. "Hey Peter, sorry to bug you. Have you got a second?"

I do it all the time. It's just one quick question. It seems so inconsequential to breaking up someone's time.

"Have you got a second? I just have one question?" in reality-speak actually means, "Have you got an hour?" Most



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Before you know it, another staff member has joined the "quick question," and we've got a full-fledged impromptu meeting on our hands. A loud sucking sound emanates from the conference room as more and more people are pulled away from their immediate tasks.

And it's not just person-to-person interruptions that are causing so much disruption. There are phone calls and e-mails that get sporadically tossed our way.

This problem is so widespread that the Time-Management Institute (yes, there is one) coined the disease "Chronophagia," meaning that your time (chrono) is constantly being eaten up (phage). Symptoms

mans and electronics. Causes include "informationitis" and "meeting-itis," as well as a lack of common courtesy.

We live in the culture of immediacy. Information regarding whatever we want is at our fingertips, and we end up treating our co-workers no differently than we treat the Internet. "I want this now" gets translated into "I need this now. It must be really important."

The combination of this need for immediate answers along with gymnasium-like offices and trendy open-door policies creates the perfect recipe for a work environment filled with interruptions. It's no wonder that menial tasks take all day to

In a 1998 *Jugglezine.com* article, writer and editor Christine Maclean tells a story where a few decades ago, at Hallmark, employees tied ribbons to their cubicles. A green ribbon indicated they were available. A red ribbon meant, Please do not disturb. Inevitably, people tacked up red ribbons and left them there for good.

So, what can you do to ward off those pesky interruptions?

■ If the layout of your office is encouraging people to just stop by and chat, move things around a bit. Surround your chair with tall potted plants. If budget allows, enclose your cubicle with vertical filing cabinets, one of which can house a

leather-bound novel.

■ Make it physically painful for co-workers to hang out in your space. I read a story about a guy who sawed off a few inches on the front legs of extra desk chairs. Anyone that sat down got sore leg muscles trying to keep from sliding forward. If that doesn't work, simply push them off the chair when you think they've lingered too long.

■ Log all of your interruptions for a week. Note the time, the intruder's name, the reason, and the duration. At the end of the week, send an e-mail to everyone on the log demanding that they leave you alone. Assuming you don't get fired, people will stop bothering you (and stop inviting you to functions).

■ When a co-worker approaches your desk, immediately stand up. While he is speaking glance frequently at your watch, and sigh every 15 seconds or so. This method works well if you also respond to questions with a non sequitur. Question: "David, have you sent that fax to the agent yet?" Response: "Please remove your shoes. Are you hungry?"

■ Get used to it. It's not going to get any better. Frequent interruptions are a part of life and a huge part of work. Unless you work in an inaccessible hole, your immediate attention is going to be required at many points of each day. Instead, cherish the fact that you're so desperately needed. Go home and tell your spouse, "Honey, they can't live without me."

During a 1942 address Franklin D. Roosevelt stated, "Never before have we had so little time in which to do so much." I'm sure he was referring to something much more serious and global than that darn cost estimate I've got to finish by the end of the week, but the sentiment applies just as strongly to work culture.

Of course, time is limited, and you've still got to get your work done, which has become impossible because of all these interruptions. The trick, then, is to set up something clever for your next performance review.

Make sure your buddy is eavesdropping during the review. Your boss will wrinkle his forehead and say, "Hmmm, I've noticed that you have a hard time completing many of your assignments."

Your friend should then immediately pop his head in the door and say to your boss, "Excuse me, sir. Have you got a second? I have a really quick question."