**Distractions Equal Inefficiency**

By David L. Lawrence

Being distracted from your work can be frustrating. But, it can also cost you and your firm money. Distractions can lead to delays in getting work done, potentially making mistakes in your work and can have the effect of disrupting an otherwise harmonious office environment.

Studies have shown that, when distracted from an analytical task, it can take upwards of 10 to 20 minutes to get back on task mentally. Multiply this times the number of given distractions in a given day, times the number of affected employees, times the number of work days in a given year, and you have major roadblocks to efficiency.

Essentially, there are two main types of distractions, visual and auditory. A visual distraction by definition is where some movement in the range of your vision causes you to interrupt your train of thought or current activity. The most common form of this in an office is movement in the office that is observed, often with peripheral vision, that causes the observer to stop what they are doing. In an office situation, this could be due to the configuration of the furniture, the height of cubicle walls or the presence of clear lines of sight from one office to another.

Visual distractions do not necessarily have to originate outside of a person’s work area. There are plenty of visual distractions within a person’s desk area. Most notably is the computer, tablet, cell phone or other electronic device. With respect to the computer, simply reading answering emails that minute they show up on your desktop can be very disruptive. Text messages from friends and family members can also interrupt your thinking or analytical work.

An auditory distraction is a noise, loud conversation or other auditory event that breaks your concentration. Even something as sublime as a loud copying machine, placed near a desk with someone who is doing analytical work, can provide an annoying auditory distraction.

Multi-tasking is often lauded as a good skill. Yet, studies have shown that there are hidden costs to multi-tasking that may not be readily apparent. Joshua Rubinstein, Ph.D., of the Federal Aviation Administration, and David Meyer, Ph.D., and Jeffrey Evans, Ph.D., both at the University of Michigan, describe their research in the August issue of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance,* published by the American Psychological Association (APA). “The measurements revealed that for all types of tasks, subjects lost time when they had to switch from one task to another, and time costs increased with the complexity of the tasks, so it took significantly longer to switch between more complex tasks. Time costs also were greater when subjects switched to tasks that were relatively unfamiliar.”

There are a few common and inexpensive tips to help you overcome distractions.

1. **Tame the phone**

If the phone is a problem, use your assistant to deflect all but the really important calls. Provide resources so your assistants can handle most of the common matters on their own without requiring your input.

1. **Corral your email**

Stop jumping to answer every single e-mail as soon as they arrive – dedicate some time blocks each day for managing your e-mail. For example, one session during the morning hours and another one in the afternoon should work reasonably well. Consider setting an auto responder message telling when you are reading your e-mails. Most people expect you to react to e-mails instantly, but communicating them about the way you process your e-mail, helps them to understand if you are not getting back to them as soon as possible. You do not need to know the second a new e-mail arrives to your inbox – turn off the notifications (sound, pop-up windows, etc.). If you have subscribed to various mailing lists, evaluate them critically, if you really need to subscribe them. If not, unsubscribe! Define rules for certain types of e-mails, so that they are being handled automatically. If you use Outlook, you can define rules for moving emails when received into sub-folders. By categorizing those folders in order of priority, you will know the folder you should always check first, etc.

1. **Close the door**

If walk-in distractions are becoming too frequent, shut the door. Scheduling “office hours” or regular meetings with your staff are simple strategies that can reduce distractions. If your staff and/or co-workers understand that when the door is closed, you are not to be interrupted (except for emergencies).

1. **Reduce or eliminate clutter**

A cluttered desk and office can be a distraction in and of itself. Get rid of unnecessary papers and other items you do not need, especially those that are near your main work surface. Not having all of that junk to look at will help you concentrate more on your work.

1. **Play music or work in silence**

Some people concentrate better with soft music playing in the background because it drowns out other noises and distractions. Others prefer more up-tempo music because it helps keep them alert. And some people work much better with total peace and quiet. Studies have shown that certain masking sounds, music, or other, can affect the behavior of people. As an example, some department stores use soft, slow-tempo music during the day to cause shoppers to pause or slow their pace of shopping, which increases the likelihood of higher sales. At the end of the day, the music increases speed and tempo, causing shoppers to hurry, which makes the task of closing the store that much easier. Similar concepts can be applied in any workplace.

1. **Get plenty of sleep**

Lack of sleep makes you tired during the day. And, being tired can result in an inability to concentrate on your work. The average adult needs 7 to 8 hours of sleep per night. If you’re not getting that much, it could be adversely affecting your productivity.

1. **Use a to-do list to help you keep track of what you need to do**

Using a to-do list to capture what you need to do instead of relying on your memory can help you focus and concentrate on the task at hand because you avoid all those distracting thoughts floating around in your head.

You don’t have to keep reminding yourself to do this or that because you’ve already captured it.

There are a number of time management software tools you can use to help with this, many are free. Trog Bar ([www.priacta.com](http://www.priacta.com)), ScheduFlow Online ([www.duoserve.com](http://www.duoserve.com)) and Efficient Calendar Free ([www.efficientsoftware.net](http://www.efficientsoftware.net)) are three solutions you may want to check out. All three are available from [www.download.cnet.com](http://www.download.cnet.com).

1. **Take a planned break**

When your brain is on overload, take a break if possible, but time it to coincide with a natural break in your work or schedule. If you’re in a work environment where your breaks are scheduled, try to switch to a less demanding task for a few minutes. Anything that gets your mind off of the task you’re having trouble with for a short time will help. Then you can get back to it in a more refreshed state.

1. **Reduce or eliminate multi-tasking**

Unless the group of tasks are associated, simple and ease to manage, multi-tasking can actually be harmful to your work and cost your firm money.

Staying focused is vital if you want to be a productive professional. Many distractions can be avoided, and you can improve your focus with some simple adjustments. Once your mind is able to concentrate on the work at hand, you can get it done much more quickly and efficiently with fewer errors.

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