

and opinion. For example, someone stops in your office asking about the outcome of a sales call. If you simply convey the facts of whom you met, if the sale was a success and the amount of a contract sold, then this interruption should take no longer than two minutes. The background, context or opinion, however, may include how you were referred to this client, why the client chose your product over a competitor, details of the contract, etc. If an interruption heads in the direction of background, context or opinion it should be turned into a scheduled appointment because this information takes longer to communicate. An unplanned interruption is not the setting for this type of exchange. Suggesting a meeting at a more appropriate time ensures your discussion of the sale gets the time and attention it needs and that you can get back to the work you have committed for the day.

Sometimes despite your best efforts a brief interruption can lose direction. You can often see this coming by observing a colleague's non-verbal communication or body language. They may be light on work and have time to waste. If current events, the weather or other unrelated topics come up in discussion, a polite way to refocus the conversation without making your colleague feel slighted is to interrupt yourself (instead of them) in mid-sentence. When it is your turn to talk or make a comment, stop, state your time constraint and revisit the original work of the interruption. For example: "I know, it's the middle of December and it feels like May. We were outside as well this weekend and... ooh I'm sorry, I have to get back to this contract I'm working on. I will send you an email with the sales figures you asked for by the end of the day. It was great chatting with you." This can close your conversation and politely let your colleague know that you do not have time to chat today.

2. Communicate and Set Expectations for Completion of the Work Involved

If your work is interrupted by someone with a task request, a timeframe for completion of the task must be set. Usually "as soon as possible" is the answer you will get when you ask when something needs to be done. Here's a good rule of thumb, if completing this task will take under two minutes, do it now. Execute the work and move on so you can get back to what you were doing. If it will take longer, then dropping everything to work on it immediately may not be the most realistic or efficient way to handle it. To avoid misunderstanding and set expectations, always ask for the drop dead date or time for completion, so you can work it into your plan. If the deadline is not achievable because of your schedule or workload, now is the time to have that

conversation. Being realistic about your time constraints can help you both to prioritize what is most important, and in what order future work should be completed.

3. Recover Quickly Once an Interruption is Finished

Once an interruption distracts you from a project or your work, getting back to where you left off can sometimes take longer than the interruption itself. The best way to stay on task throughout your day is to keep a written daily plan. One of the many benefits of having a written daily plan, that outlines your goals for the day, is that you can return to productive work more quickly after an interruption, just by consulting your plan. Having a plan to consult can also help prevent you from using an interruption to procrastinate by giving you a clear reminder of what you intended to accomplish today.

4. Work Interruptions into Your Schedule

If you are plagued with interruptions throughout your day, schedule a block of time when visits from your colleagues are welcome, for example, an "open door" time from 1:00 - 2:00 p.m. Conversely, you could schedule some time occasionally when you are simply unavailable. Yes, unavailable. Not being available may include letting calls go through to voice mail, not checking email every five minutes, moving to a location where no one can reach you or simply putting a sign on your door or cubicle that says "I will be unavailable until after 11:00 a.m." If your organization has a networked calendaring system like Outlook, Lotus Notes or GroupWise be sure to block off this time as unavailable. This will ensure that people checking your calendar electronically will know that you are unavailable at that time. Whether it's twenty minutes, two hours or an entire day, in order to follow through on the commitments you've made you will have to be unavailable at some point. You can wait for the deadlines of these commitments to make you unavailable or you can schedule the time that makes the most sense. By scheduling the time that makes the most sense you remove the worry of not finishing on time and reduce a lot of stress.

5. Remember to Return the Favor

How about when you are the person doing the interrupting? Remember the rules: ask right up front for the appropriate amount of time, get right to the work of the interruption, and clearly communicate your expectations for completion. If the interruption will take longer, negotiate a time that works best for the both of you. When you are finished with your request or information exchange, thank them for their time and conclude with something like "thanks for your help, I know you're

busy, I'll let you get back to your work." Being direct and brief can give your colleague the confidence to know that they don't have to hide the next time they see you coming down the hall.

6. Avoid an In Person Interruption by Sending an Email or Voice Mail

If you know someone is busy working on a specific project, and your request is not time-sensitive, consider leaving a voicemail or email instead of interrupting their work. Your message should include what you need and when you need it and not just "call me back." This allows the person you are contacting to leave you the pertinent information in the same manner and avoids ongoing phone tag. Furthermore, if the situation allows, let the recipient of your message know if no reply is necessary. This tip works great when confirming an appointment, agenda, selections or the like.

7. Be Polite and Honest

Being polite and honest means being respectful of the other person and telling them the truth. Telling the other person you're busy, you have a call coming in, or that you're in a meeting when you're not, is lying. Ignoring the other person, not looking them in the eye, talking over them or cutting them off is disrespectful. It is also unnecessary to stand up, walk to their office to get them out of yours, look at your watch or start working while they are talking. These are all non-verbal ways of communicating that you don't have time right now. You don't have to do any of these things to manage an interruption effectively. If you look the other person in the eye, are genuinely happy to see them, tell them what you're doing at the moment they interrupt you and ask a pointed question you will save more time than all these other techniques put together. You will also be able to keep your relationships strong and productive for the long term.

There are days and seasons when you have more time for interruptions than others. When you don't have time, these short rules and tips can help you to get some time back and regain control of your day.

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