

Excuse me, I am trying to work

Tim Dowling, The Guardian

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The average worker spends two hours a day fielding phone calls, emails and annoying colleagues.

The morning begins with a blank screen. Actually, it starts with a warning from my computer that it - nay, we - are at considerable risk, because we don't have any anti-viral software, even though we do. Then comes the AOL ad that I have had to endure every morning since I bought this computer, even though I have ticked the box that says "Don't show this again" every morning since I bought this computer.

According to a report from New Scientist, this sort of petty distraction - emails and phone calls from colleagues and family; people dropping by your desk; computer-generated reminders - takes up more than two hours of the typical working day. Researchers from the University of California discovered that this blizzard of interruptions left workers with no more than ...

Ping! I have six emails, mostly daily briefings from websites whose daily briefings I have never knowingly subscribed to; it's just that my unsubscribing has been insufficiently rigorous. One is the first of many "How's it going?" emails from the person who commissioned this article. I don't want to tell him that I have spent nearly 30 minutes weighing up various special offers for online access to New Scientist, before deciding it would be easier to go out and buy a copy. Then someone else from the paper rings on an unrelated matter. Where was I?

Oh, right: workers in today's "always on" culture find themselves so unable to concentrate on the task at hand that many believe they are suffering from attention deficit disorder. I think that's right. At least, I got that impression from skimming the article, although when I went back to find that bit later it sort of ... Hang on - phone.

Sorry about that. Fortunately, I instantly detected the telltale-echoing whoosh of an unsolicited sales call originating in Jaipur and hung up straight away. In the meantime the anti-viral software my computer doesn't know it uses has taken it upon itself to download a few updates. So, anyway, they didn't have ADD, these workers. In fact, the study showed that due to various distractions their periods of sustained, uninterrupted work lasted on average just three minutes. Another study by London's Institute of Psychiatry last year found constant disruption from emails and phone calls had a greater effect on IQ than smoking marijuana.

The effect of all this distraction on productivity can be severe. Once your attention span is disrupted, it takes time to recouple yourself to your previous train of thought. If you are interrupted while trying to remember what it was you were meant to be doing, you might as

well call it quits. The University of California study found that more than 20 per cent of interrupted tasks were not resumed the same day.

Where once our daily life interrupted our work, now our work interrupts our work. We have become enslaved to the very technology that was supposed to free us from office drudgery, from travel, from face-to-face meetings with disagreeable co-workers. Technology might once again come to the rescue, however. Software designed to prioritise communications and assess your "interruptability" is being tested by Microsoft. If it works it could become the electronic equivalent of an executive secretary, shielding you from unwanted intrusion.

But the real question is not how we prioritise these interruptions; the real question is, what am I doing standing in the garden? I remember someone coming to the door with a package, and then taking a call on my mobile, the first "When do you think you'll be filing?" call of the afternoon. Then the dog wanted to go out and refused to take later for an answer. I also see I have a bit of string wrapped around my finger, to remind me of ... what?

In the end, blaming technology for all this disruption, or indeed looking to it for salvation, may be missing the point. While it is true that it is easier to interrupt someone by email than it is in person, the University of California study found that half the total distractions we experience in a typical work day are self-inflicted: sending emails, placing phone calls, fiddling with the paper tray or bothering busy colleagues.

Back at my desk there are various emails from various companies from which I have ordered various products, all telling me that we have reached some meaningless intermediate stage in the transaction. I receive the second "When will you be filing?" phone call of the afternoon. I look around for the bit of paper on which I scrawled the brilliant idea I had for the last paragraph. I can't find it anywhere.

Now for some reason I'm standing in the garden again, staring at a potted tomato plant which is lying forlornly on its side. It wants tying up, I think. That must have been what that bit of string was for.

SEVEN WAYS TO MINIMISE DISTRACTION

- Put up a Do Not Disturb sign, or an obvious signal that you are busy. Insist your colleagues respect it.
- Have your desk face away from the flow of people, so no one can catch your eye.
- Always stand up to talk to someone who is interrupting you, so they know what they're doing.
- Put a clock in plain view of visitors and check it while you are talking.
- If an interruption is likely to take longer than two minutes, add it to your to-do list and go back to what you were already doing.
- Keep a notebook open and write down what you are doing as soon as you are interrupted.
- Cutting two centimetres off the front legs of a chair makes it just uncomfortable enough to keep visits short.

Source: New Scientist

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