

When Little Interruptions Add Up

How to minimize disruption and maximize productivity

Marianne's job as a lead software engineer kept her working long hours, but she still wasn't meeting her project deadlines (or having much fun). The stress was taking its toll, and she started thinking about switching jobs to a company that offered her a more realistic workload and better work/life balance. Sound familiar?

Switching jobs is one way to deal with it, but often there's a quicker, easier, and simpler way to get to the root of your frustration. The opportunity is right where you are. To give you an idea, here's how we began to address Marianne's situation.

After interviewing her about a typical workday and reviewing her calendar and project list, we found one of her biggest drains was the number of little interruptions she dealt with each day (an issue for many people.)

You may recognize the scenario: Marianne is concentrating on a task when a coworker walks in or calls to ask for her help. She stops what she's doing to pull a file, search her computer, or discuss their problem. After it's resolved, they leave, and Marianne hears herself saying, "Now, where was I?" By the time she's back in her groove, she's interrupted again. It's no wonder she felt like she wasn't getting much done.

What's really going on? When people assume they can interrupt you for help at any time, they will. This becomes an unconscious habit on your part as well as theirs. Sometimes coworkers find it's just easier to ask you, rather than taking time to think through a problem or research a question themselves. They take the path of least resistance. Of course, if you're in customer service or working at a help desk, then your job is to answer questions and resolve others' issues. More than likely, though, your job includes many duties, but helping others, though expected, probably isn't even listed in your job description. Regardless, when a coworker asks, "Do you have a minute?" it's easy to react with an automatic "Sure."



When you're concentrating on a task, these seemingly minor interruptions stop your creative flow and cause a subtle drain on your energy. Reacting unconsciously creates tension in your body and over time leads to a buildup of stress, especially if you get behind on your own deadlines.

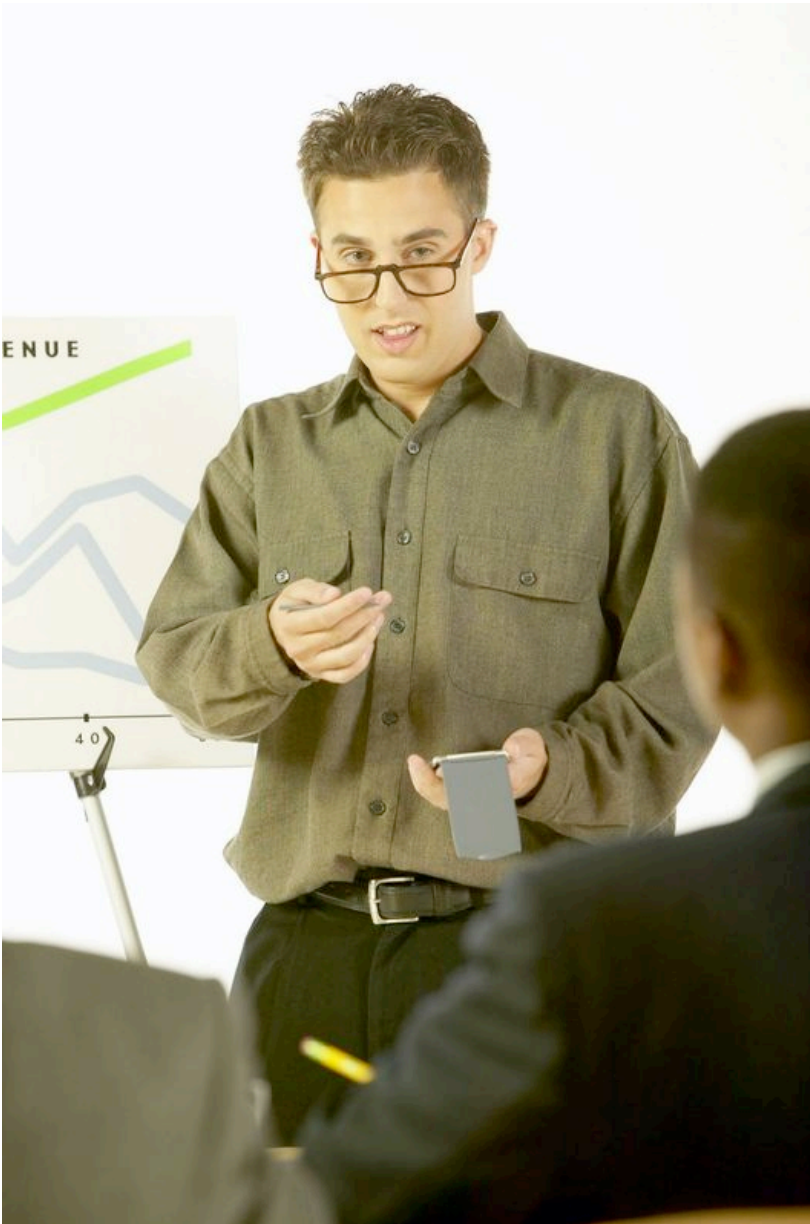
So what can you do about it? If you know you need uninterrupted time to work on projects, plan to work on them when you're less likely to be interrupted. Then, ask coworkers not to disturb you during those times. If possible, close your door to reinforce the message.

If you don't have an office, if it's not practical to keep your door closed, or if people still walk in on you, try these options to take control of the situation:

- Don't answer your phone while working on a focused project. If possible, schedule specific times during the day to listen to messages and return calls. Or even take it a step further and leave a message on your voice mail letting callers know that you return calls between 2 and 4 p.m., for example.
- When a coworker walks in your office, instead of trying to answer questions or solve problems on the spot, set a time to talk with them that works well for both of you.

This is setting a boundary that politely lets people know you value your time and you manage your schedule. While waiting for you, they may find their answers elsewhere or solve the problem on their own. Also, if they come up with other questions in the meantime, they can add these to their list of things to discuss with you. You'll spend less time handling their questions all at once rather than one at a time.

- If the situation calls for your immediate attention, instead of solving the issue yourself, ask open-ended questions. This helps the person draw on their own knowledge and wisdom and possibly discover the answer on their own. For example, if a coworker presents a problem, ask her questions like, "What options do you have to resolve it? Which option would you recommend? Why?"



Even though you've been interrupted and it may take a little longer than answering the question yourself, you help the person develop their thinking process. By using this approach consistently, they learn to anticipate the questions you'll ask before coming to see you and may even find the answers to their own questions. (As the proverb suggests, you're not just giving them a fish, you're teaching them how to fish.)

- For new employees or coworkers who genuinely need more direction, designate set times to meet. For example, new employees may initially need daily guidance, so you may schedule a time each morning to get them started for the day. By having dedicated times to meet: 1) you send a message that you value the employee and encourage their questions; 2) you reassure the employee that they're not bothering you; 3) you're modeling how you want to be treated; and 4) you also have time to list things to discuss with the employee, so you both are prepared for the meeting.

- And pay attention to how you treat others when you ask for assistance. When you walk into someone's office or cubicle and they appear to be in the middle of something, before you launch in, ask if this is a good time or when would be a good time to meet.

It's great to help others, but do so on your terms so you don't sacrifice your own productivity. Like Marianne, you may discover when you have uninterrupted time to work on those projects that call for your undivided attention, you can complete your projects in less time, optimize your creative flow, and reduce your stress level – without changing jobs. **AL**

Christine Gust has worked with entrepreneurs, employees, and senior managers. With more than 17 years experience, an MBA, and a Doctor of Naturopathy, she combines sound business practices and common sense principles of healthy living to teach you how to excel and enjoy work– without sacrificing yourself. Visit www.christinegust.com.