

Managing Distractions in the Workplace

by Edel Walsh

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the way we work. For the most part office workers swiftly moved to full time working from home at the outset of the pandemic. While that brought about its own challenges, people are adaptable, and organisations and their employees adjusted accordingly

As restrictions ease, we are seeing the return to the office. For some it is on a full-time basis and for others it is a hybrid arrangement. We are adapting once more but like the initial lockdowns that does not come without its challenges. I have set out tools and strategies to support with managing the distractions in the workplace whether that is at home or in the office.

Distractions and interruptions come from ourselves and others. As people re-adjust back into the office environment we are no longer being interrupted by our children, family members or house mates. We may be interrupted by our colleagues popping over to our desk for a quick chat or to ask a quick question. Peripheral distractions such as phones ringing, and overhearing conversations can be disruptive.

We are sociable beings and for some of us human connection was one of the things we missed throughout the pandemic. Being distracted by chatty colleagues is out of our control. It is best to expect it, accept it and plan for it. In addition, invaluable secondary learning can take place by over hearing conversations in the office that are happening around you.

While these distractions may be out of your control, there are strategies we can put in place to ease the burden of disturbances. These include investing in noise cancelling headphones, or move to a quiet area, if possible, when you are trying to do some focussed work. It is also worth reflecting on whether you are the time stealer in the office. Are you the person who is popping

over to a colleague for a quick chat as they are engrossed in their work or the person who talks very loudly on calls all day long? Try switching perspectives, if you are immersed in a piece of work, how would you feel to be interrupted for a chat that could take place at a coffee break or lunch time. If you are leading a call in the open plan office, can you move to a quieter location or re-schedule these calls to a day you are working from home?

Some distractions are out of our control but when they are within our control there are choices we can make.

Whether we are working from home or working in the office, the most obvious distraction that impedes productivity is email, instant messages, and notifications. The costs on productivity associated with quickly checking a message or a notification on your device when you are in the middle of a task are substantial. While we think we are multi-tasking and being productive, our brains do not react very well to the interruption. According to Gloria Mark, it can take on average 25 minutes to resume working on a task after we have been interrupted. If our brain does not like these interruptions, then why does it go looking for them? Our brain may be craving the dopamine hit we get when someone likes our social media post, or it may be looking for something more enticing than what we are currently working on.

If interruptions are within our control, then we can manage them.

- Check your emails only if you have



the time, attention, and energy to deal with them. According to research carried out by McKinsey, 28% of work time is spent on email, we check our emails on average 11 times per hour and 84% of us keep our email open while working. Very little productive work can be done with this many disruptions. Some simple strategies include blocking a set time in your diary every day for a few times a day to check your email. When you are trying to complete a task, a simple solution is to shut down your email application.

- When you are sending emails, be cognisant of your recipient's time. Keep the message short, clear and to the point. People spend on average 12 seconds reading an email, anything longer you will lose their attention.
- Consider if it necessary to "reply to all" or cc'ing everyone in the office on your email. This can add increased clutter to people's inbox and to their headspace. Only email the people who need to be informed.
- Put your device on airplane mode. This will eliminate the possibility of a notification disrupting your work. You are then in control of when you deal with the notifications. If it is too tempting to turn off airplane mode while the device is sitting on your desk, put it in a drawer in another



room. That way you must physically get up out of your desk to get the device.

- Do a spring clean of your apps. What are the apps that waste too much of your time and attention? Can you live without them? If this is a step too far, can you move these time stealers from your phone to another device such as an iPad that is not attached to your fingers all times.

After emails, meetings are one of the biggest disruptions we face throughout the day. Before arranging a meeting, it is worth asking yourself some questions:

- Is the meeting necessary?
- Is it necessary for all the attendees on the list to be there?
- Have you detailed an agenda for the meeting?

If you are the recipient of a meeting request, you too should ask yourself these questions and challenge yourself as to whether or not it is necessary for you to attend every meeting that arrives into your diary.

Another option for employers is to implement a policy where there is certain times of the day or certain hours in the week that meetings are not scheduled. This allows people to work on their tasks without being interrupted.

With all these distractions impeding our productivity, is also worth reflecting on the following:

- Set an intention or a goal to progress or complete a task for your working day or your working week. To make the goal more realistic, it is worth making it a SMART goal (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time Bound). Hold yourself to account by reflecting on the goal at the end of the day/week. If you did not achieve the goal, write down the obstacles that were in your way of achieving your goal.
- Use the pomodoro time management technique. This technique allows you to break down big projects into doable pieces of work. Each piece of work is called a pomodoro and lasts 25 minutes followed by a short break of 5 minutes.
- Try doing your most mentally challenging work first when we have the energy needed to deal with it.
- Schedule some thinking time or focus time every week in your diary. You can not figure out what is important in your role if you are on call the whole time. You need space to focus and strategize.
- Learn to say no! If you are going to say no to a piece of work, say it with conviction. It is much better to say,

"I can't do this right now" as opposed to "I will try and make this work" and letting the person down later.

- If possible, withdraw from the noise of the office or the outside world to focus deeply on a piece of work. Eliminate any time-wasting distractions that might get in your way.

My final word, if you find that you are easily distracted, it is worth reflecting on whether you are in control of these distractions. If you are in control, there is always a choice to be made.



Edel Walsh

Personal Leadership Coach

She specialises in helping her clients get clear about their purpose, career aspirations and work-life balance. Her website is www.edelwalsh.ie