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Ways to manage workplace interruptions

Projects often require collaboration, but that doesn't have to include coworkers making lengthy surprise visits to your office.

Even if you minimize the many electronic distractions, you may still get sidetracked by well-meaning colleagues calling you or, worse, descending on your office.

In some ways these interruptions come with the job. "Not being disturbed can be particularly difficult in corporate communications when part of our function is being accessible and available to the media and senior executives when they call," says Vic Beck, director of communication planning and strategy for S4 Inc., a professional services and consulting firm.

When it comes to curbing interruptions, many factors are beyond your control. These include the corporate culture and your physical work environment. For example, do you have a door to close?

Unless you can ban unannounced visits, you can do little proactively to prevent interruptions. Scheduling time for discussion and interactive dialogue helps, but Beck points out that this approach won't pay off unless both managers and staff adhere to the allotted time. You may not be able to stop all interruptions, but the following techniques can discourage them.

Post a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the entrance to your office. Or keep it light by amending that to "Do Not Disturb, Einstein at Work." With or without the Einstein reference, some co-workers may initially assume you're joking or ignore the sign. Eventually most people will take you seriously, especially if you practice what you preach by not interrupting them.

Inform callers that you're not available. Beck suggests that on particularly hectic days you change your outgoing voice-mail message to say you're in the office on deadline, but if callers have an urgent message, they can try your cell phone number. Beck warns that you must remember to change your message back to a standard greeting. "The key takeaway here is: If your solitude is so critical to your work productivity, you should proactively communicate to those who typically demand your time regularly—especially co-workers who need your counsel and input in order for them to be productive in their own jobs."

Close your e-mail program. You can still be accessible by using an out-of-office e-mail assistant stating that you're in the office but aren't looking at e-mail at the moment. The message can also suggest that callers contact you on your cell phone if it's urgent.

Know when to accept impromptu visits from co-workers. If you have worked with your staff long enough, you probably know which employees tend to run to your office for matters that don't need immediate attention. Adjust your responses accordingly.

WTW West Coast correspondent Judy Artunian interviewed Vic Beck, director of communication planning and strategy, S4Inc; 508/735-3126; vbeck@s4inc.com; www.s4inc.com.

When interruptions work

If interrupting you makes your staff more productive, don't be too quick to discourage their intrusions, Vic Beck suggests. Part of a supervisor's responsibility is to provide the staff with counsel, guidance and advice that raise productivity.

All team members should understand that sometimes interruptions are necessary, that sometimes waiting could cause a costly delay.

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