



Distraction-Free Work

The phone is ringing, printers and copiers are cranking, co-workers are talking, and the boss stops by for a visit. Then there are the emails that need to be answered, instant messages and voicemail to respond to, and...where is that 15-page spreadsheet you prepared last week?

Does this describe your work environment? If so, then you may have a problem with distractions, which can interrupt the flow of your work and lead to an increasing sense of frustration. According to a study by *BOSTI (Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation)*, across all business units and job types, the workplace quality that has the strongest effect on individual and team performance is the ability to do distraction-free solo work.

Fortunately, there are ways to overcome these distractions, so that you can work at your peak. A good starting point is to ask yourself some questions about your workplace, your work processes and your own behavior.

Workplace. How much foot traffic is there around your work area? Do you have enough space? What is the proximity of phones, equipment and conversations to your space? Does your space reflect the quality of your work? Do you have proper lighting and ventilation? Are supplies easy to access?

If you're not in charge of your work environment, find out who is and discuss possible solutions with that individual. For example, relocating equipment, changing the placement of supplies and reorganizing your space may be simple and quickly achieved, whereas proper lighting and ventilation may require more planning and expense.

Work Processes. Do you spend a lot of time looking for emails, files and papers? Do you use a system for planning effectively and managing projects? Can you easily access contacts, phone numbers and reading materials? Do you have a method for managing and tracking daily tasks?

Make sure you're completely utilizing planning and contact management tools like Outlook. These tools allow you to manage your emails, contacts, phone numbers, tasks and calendar all in one place. For portability, you can synchronize Outlook with devices like a Palm.

To organize your emails, set up folders in Outlook by project or by client. Set up your electronic and paper files utilizing the same method for consistency. If you're not an expert at setting up and using personal organization and planning systems, seek help.

Work Behavior. Are you arriving to your destination on time, or are others causing you to be consistently late? Are there co-workers standing between you and your work area, eager to make small talk? Do you find that you're addicted to email? Are you multi-tasking?

Knowing you'll be arriving on time can cut down on the distraction of rushing your routine to prepare to get to work or a meeting, so readjust your schedule or make other travel arrangements.

Be assertive and set boundaries with your work friends. You may need to tell them that if they want to have a conversation to walk along with you, or make a lunch date to talk.

Use technology to help avoid distractions. If you have voicemail, let the phone ring during busy times. For non-vital communications, provide clients with a fax number or email address to reduce on the number of calls you receive. Then, respond at your own pace.



The reverse of this is also true. One busy executive turned off the e-mail setting that notifies him when a message is received. Instead, he looks at unread messages twice a day. Though this may bother some, it has cut the time he spends on e-mail to less than two hours a day.

Finally, don't buy into the belief that multitasking allows you to get more done. A report from the *American Psychology Association* revealed that even though multitasking may seem more efficient, it actually takes more time to complete those multiple tasks in the long run.

Instead, practice being attentive; it is like adding more hours to your day. You actually get more done, enjoy things more, and feel less stress. Imagine what it would be like if every time your co-worker, spouse or child wanted to say something to you, you turned and gave that person *all* your attention. No glancing at the computer, talking on the phone or reading a report... just 100% totally there!

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