

Managing Interruptions

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ABSTRACT

Today's world increasingly operates utilizing quick responses to the continual bombardment of bits and pieces of information and data. Both at work and at home, rapid reactions to sources of news are expected and often demanded. Although the subject of time management interruptions has been mentioned previously in the business literature, when discussed, interruptions were treated as annoyances to be avoided rather than as events to be encouraged. This paper discusses and classifies interruptions as expected or unexpected and mentions three strategies on how to deal with interruptions. Also, twelve pressures and influences are presented which have combined to produce a new need to manage interruptions, namely: (1) immediate gratification mentality; (2) time urgency environment; (3) accessibility or open door expectation; (4) self interest economics; (5) just-in-time production; (6) quick response marketing; (7) value added accounting; (8) shareholder value finance; (9) multitasking work load; (10) email and electronic etiquette; (11) employee empowerment; and, (12) shift from private to public rights.



INTRODUCTION

Management in the 21st century is much different from that practiced in previous decades. The most critical issue is no longer quantity, quality, price, value, location, geography, climate and/or culture. The essential management factor is now time and its efficient and effective utilization.¹ Time is now our most highly valued possession although oddly enough it is free to us, and we all have the same amount of it per day. How we manage our time will determine how successful or unsuccessful we become in business and in life.² This success will ultimately depend on how well we manage small increments of time often in only a few minute intervals,

or "interruptions" as the authors prefer to call them.



OPENING SCENERIO

For most managers today, there are no leisurely days with a relaxed pace. The efficient executive today is constantly bombarded with overnight mailings, stop-in visitors, surface mail, telephone calls, inter-office deliveries, e-mails, and faxed messages.³ Even when out of the office, cell telephones, pagers, palm pilots and laptops keep a busy supervisor in constant contact with constituents.

We must guard against believing that this is not normal and also that such behavior is undesirable. You must come to the point where you recognize that this is how the business world works today and that you are a part of it. In the past, people made appointments and sometimes waited weeks for meetings to take place. The best managers today provide information when it is needed, and large projects are accomplished bit by bit and minute by minute with updated data, knowledge and information.

This article is about the need to manage interruptions. Managers today are constantly being interrupted by people asking for or supplying titbits of information, data and knowledge. The interruptions are continuous all day long for 8, 10, or more hours. There are many reasons and influences causing these constant interruptions. This article will discuss twelve such pressures although the listing is not exhaustive and other factors are also at work today.

ENLIGHTENMENT NOT INFRINGEMENT

Managing interruptions is properly viewed as personal enlightenment not as individual infringement. Large blocks of quiet time to relax and to reflect have become a relic of past administrative eras.¹ Increased world-wide competition and a faster pace of modern life demand faster personal and corporate decision making. Adroit administrators know this reality and accept it as a fact of life.

If you are not presently managing interruptions, you should be. The number one cause of bad management is insufficient information. Lack of productivity is almost always traced to wasting time and waiting for data to arrive. People need accurate information and data to do their work. Without same, nothing gets accomplished. Not only should you as an effective manager be managing interruptions, but also you in turn should continuously be seeking the information and the inputs that you need to perform your work efficiently.

AN INTERRUPTIONS TYPOLOGY

Table 1 below presents an interruptions typology.

Strategy	Interruptions	
	Expected	Unexpected
Ignore	Delay input	Reject intrusion
Listen Only	Gather information	Social gossip
Act upon	Decide & implement	Emergencies

Table 1. An Interruptions Typology

Today managers should expect interruptions whereas in the past, interruptions were viewed as unexpected. Managers should attempt to minimize unexpected operations but be more willing to accept expected interruptions. Expected interruptions can be ignored which will delay input or they can be treated as information gathering events which may now or later be used as decision criteria for actions. The point is to expect interruptions and use the information gathered to help make more timely decisions.

This article will discuss twelve pressures or influences which collectively have ushered in the need to manage interruptions. These dozen directives in order of presentation include: (1) immediate gratification mentality; (2) time urgency environment; (3) accessibility or open door expectation; (4) self interest economics; (5) just-in-time production; (6) quick response marketing; (7) value added accounting; (8) shareholder value finance; (9) multitasking work load; (10) e-mail and electronic etiquette; (11) employee empowerment; and, (12) shift from private to public rights.

IMMEDIATE GRATIFICATION MENTALITY

We must move away from the PIG (Problem of Immediate Gratification) mentality. PIG refers to the universal principle that a small immediate reward has a greater influence than a much larger, but delayed reward.⁵ Unfortunately, patience is seldom seen as a virtue today. We increasingly live in an instant society that wants needs filled now, not in the future. There, of course, are both positive benefits and negative consequences of desiring immediate gratification.⁶ The 1980s were especially identified as an era of the "me" and "now" generation. This immediate gratification mentality has helped to evolve the need to manage interruptions. At times this type of thinking and acting is both rude and crude, but it has nonetheless become commonplace.

Immediate gratification has been an outgrowth of our educational system with its emphasis on self-actualization, self-control, and self-determination which have been taught at all grade levels. The focus has been on the individual and his or her uniqueness and specialness. During the last several decades, individuals freedom became paramount and overemphasized as societal responsibilities took a back seat. Unrecognized during these decades was the big difference between rights and responsibilities. Rights involve receiving from others;

responsibilities involve giving to others.⁷

What is needed today in the 21st century both in our organizations and in our society as a whole is a "we" and macro, not a "me" and micro, orientation. Individually and collectively, we must work for the common good and not just personal pleasure. Managing interruptions can be a positive practice, but we need to shift the focus from self (micro) to others (macro). Wanting things now rather than later is not necessarily bad, especially if it tends to advance global human development.

TIME URGENCY ENVIRONMENT

We have come to commonly believe in the time value of money and discounted cash flows. But as stated previously, time is more precious and valuable than money. We need, accordingly, to recognize the time value of time. Most of us have recognized perhaps unconsciously this time value of time so much so that we live in a time urgency environment.⁸ This time urgency is very acute today and is a leading determinant of stress. And stress related illnesses are now the number one reason for sick days and missed workdays.⁹

Time urgency has resulted from many interrelated environmental factors. Humans have more than just physiological and social needs. There is an innate need for information, knowledge and understanding which effect self-control and self-actualization. Information is actually nourishment for the soul. Personal worth and self esteem are impacted by the timeliness of information. The control of information and the control of time are thus power or influence variables. Having to wait for someone or something is interpreted as a sign of disrespect. The longer we wait, the more we believe that somebody does not value our existence or availability.

Human attention time and time span of discretion are shrinking and contributing to our time urgency environment. Management training and development courses now popularly deal with time management. Ken Blanchard's *The One Minute Manager* and its spinoffs have been top selling books for decades having sold over seven million copies and been translated into twenty-six languages.¹⁰ As will be explained in greater detail later, speed is often the distinguishing characteristic among competing products, persons and events.¹¹ And in every and all instances, faster (not slower) is believed to be better. Time urgency speeds up everything in the environment and velocity can be expected to increase even more in

future generations.

ACCESSIBILITY OR OPEN DOOR EXPECTATION

We need information to do our work. We know that our employer does not want us just sitting or standing around doing nothing. Accordingly, we are expected to both get information from and give data to others whenever needed in order to accomplish tasks and complete projects as soon as possible. This accessibility is both to information and to personages. Since people are the ones with the information, they need to be available to us with the knowledge desired when we need it.

This need for information accessibility has resulted in the physical redesign of work space and organizational hierarchies.¹² Cubicles and portable planks have replaced many permanent walls and isolated office spaces. If doors remain, they are now often windowed and/or left open. Going through a chain of command or series of authority levels takes too much time, so many levels of mid management have been eliminated in restructured and downsized organizations today. Workers routinely now bypass their immediate supervisor and perhaps another authority level or two if they need input from the top. A factory worker talking with the company CEO, and a faculty member bypassing a department chair and college dean and conversing directly with a university provost are regular communications today. In the not too distant past, such activities were seen as taboo and insubordination. Even students calling a university board member and John or Jane Doe e-mailing President Bush are fairly common occurrences nowadays. If information doors are closed, we have learned to try to open them without an appointment and at our convenience in attempts to complete our work and to achieve goals in a timely manner. The build-up of electronic communication systems and the breakdown of formal organizational protocol have both advanced information accessibility and openness.¹³

SELF INTEREST ECONOMICS

A large part of today's culture is reflected in what is being taught in higher education today. At most colleges and universities, business remains the most popular major at the baccalaureate level. Schools of business grew out of and are still centered around departments of economics. Economists for many decades starting with Adam's Smith *The Wealth of Nations* and extending through Nobel economics award winning University of Chicago professor Milton Friedman have consistently advocated and pushed

economic self interest theory.¹⁴ The basic idea is that a person should pursue his or her self interest and this results in the best possible society. Since institutions are merely aggregations of individuals or human beings, organizations similarly should pursue their self interests primarily and society as a whole will benefit.¹⁵ [In practice, this theory produces a "bottom line profits only" culture.] It places 'me' ahead of 'we' in terms of attention and benefits.

Both directly and indirectly, self interest economics contributes significantly to the need for managing time interruptions. Individual and corporate decisions are based upon information, and people want their information now not later. Pursuing self interest translates into having knowledge ahead of others and getting information as soon as possible in order to derive a competitive advantage. This competitive advantage can only be sustained over time by securing the immediacy of news which necessitates the requirement to manage work interruptions.

JUST-IN-TIME PRODUCTION

Managing interruptions is also enhanced by the teaching and practice of just-in-time production. A common example is parts of a car being delivered to an automobile assembly plant just-in-time to be used on a moving conveyor line without having been stored for any period of time. Companies can save millions of dollars in this manner by eliminating the need for inventories and warehouses and the expenses related to extra buildings, insurance, maintenance, credit finance charges, etc.¹⁶ Just-in-time production started with automobiles but has now spread throughout manufacturing and has even expanded beyond goods, into service industries.

Not just parts but people today are utilized in a just-in-time manner. Increasingly, companies are using part-time temporary workers instead of full-time permanent employees.¹⁷ Labor is hired only when needed and fired or dismissed when no longer required. Instead of inventory and warehouse cost savings, the eliminated expenses are more in the forms of no paid benefits or services for part-time or temporary help which usually amounts to a savings of 30-40% of personnel charges.

In this way, just-in-time production contributes to the need to manage disruptions. Downtime is to be avoided in all forms and fashions of work. Downtime is unproductive and anti of the modern management mission of continuous motion and improvement.

QUICK RESPONSE MARKETING

In today's very competitive worldwide economy, it is becoming increasingly difficult to compete in goods and services by differentiations in product quality and/or price. Part of the reason for this is the speed at which people, money and objects transverse the globe today. Supersonic jets and the web have collapsed travel times. Courier efficiencies make overnight delivery possible to any part of the world today. One major result of all of this progress is that price and quality have been replaced by speed-to-market or availability as the main variable or feature by which products and services compete for market share today.¹⁸ This happening is an extension of the immediate gratification pressure which was explained earlier. People want and expect their consumer needs and desires to be fulfilled very quickly. If a person cannot get what he or she wants quickly, they normally today go on to another different vendor who can supply the purchase immediately.¹⁹ Quick Response (QR) is now a new marketing paradigm featuring a finished product inventory management system that times replenishment to actual daily sales.²⁰

Quick response marketing thus contributes to the need to manage distractions. It adds to time urgency and the immediacy expected in today's culture. It helps to explain why companies like Coca-Cola and Budweiser on the production side and Wal-Mart and Walgreens on the distribution side locate facilities in countries around the globe. Quick response marketing is also partially responsible for the growth of Internet sales. Customers can find what they want faster by clicking a mouse than by walking or driving around town. Americans have an insatiable desire for faster speeds-in airplanes, cars, boats, telephones, financial transactions, purchases, and information needs. This unrelentless psychosis to do something and everything faster than anyone else advances the managing of interruptions agenda.

VALUE ADDED ACCOUNTING

Another component of business education and practice is further contributing to enhanced time management. There is a theoretical and pragmatic revolution going on in the field of accounting. Value added accounting or activity based costing (ABC) is changing the accountancy field.²¹ Activity based costing is a costing method that provides managers with useful information they need regarding the contribution that each customer makes to overall profitability. Activity based costing is a method that

identifies the cost pools, or activity centers, in an organization and assigns costs to products and services based on the number of events or transactions involved in the process of providing a product or service.²²

ABC is the latest buzzword acronym and improvement mantra in the business world today. Activity based costing is an accounting methodology that assigns costs to activities rather than to products or services. This enables resource and overhead costs to be more accurately assigned to the products and the services that consume them. ABC doesn't eliminate or change costs, it provides data about how costs are actually consumed. Traditional accounting systems are inaccurate in the way that they allocate costs because they are batch not customer defined and oriented. ABC determines costs associated by customer and thus determines each customer's contribution to net profit. This is a better accounting approach, since studies show that 20% of all customers provide almost all profits of a company, 60% of company customers result in break-even economics, and the remaining 20% reduce the bottom line. In this manner, value added accounting and activity based costing establish great demand for current segregated data and immediate individualized information and thus add to the pressure for efficient time utilization.

SHAREHOLDER VALUE FINANCE

Where financiers focus their attention on profit numbers has changed over the decades. Different eras have stressed various monetary components and measures such as gross profit, net profit, sales, equity, assets, liabilities, net worth, fixed expenses, variable expenses, return on investment, income, and/or cash flow. Presently the emphasis is on shareholder value.²³ Similar to the accounting ABC current craze, the attention is becoming more micro and less macro. The individual owner or stockholder is analyzed rather than concentrating on the entire corporation as a whole. Such activity once again moves us more to a 'me' rather than 'we' society.

The belief now is that the goal of a private company is to get the value of the stock to be as high as possible for its shareholders and owners. Decisions are made to maximize the current price of the company stock so that shareholders/owners can make the most money possible, should they decide to sell some or all of their equity shares. It is indeed unfortunate that such financing is being taught and practiced so prevalently today because it forces

managers to base their decisions on current events rather than upon long-term variables and outcomes. It also ignores the fact that organizations have multiple stakeholders, not just stockholder constituents.²⁴ Maximizing shareholder value also is not relevant to the explanation of well over half of organizational labor since so much employment today is in the non-profit sector and public arenas including local, regional, state, and federal governmental agencies. Maximizing shareholder value is a plague which has infected investors and made them day traders. Derivatives, futures, options, puts, calls, straddles, IPOs and hedge funds have replaced common stocks and secure bonds as traditional, personal and corporate investments. Maximizing shareholder value and a day-trader perspective have contributed immensely to the managing time phenomenon and the push for instant information and immediate results.

MULTITASKING WORK LOAD

People today commonly perform multiple tasks at the same time.²⁵ Although productivity may have increased, in recent decades, quality of life has not.²⁶ Workers in America and around the world are working longer hours today and taking less vacation time. It is normal for an employee today to be working on a computer and talking on the telephone at the same time. Driving a car and chatting on a cell phone simultaneously is also a common occurrence. Managers today when preparing a report are frequently interrupted by telephone calls, instant messages, mail deliveries and office visitors.²⁷ More often than not, some personal business will get intertwined and meshed with company time before a report or work projected is completed. Your spouse or offspring will telephone or e-mail you, a doctor or dentist visit might need to be rescheduled, a home billing error may require attention during normal working hours, ad nauseam.

Multitasking and managing interruptions constantly interact.²⁸ In both theory and practice, it may be difficult if not impossible to distinguish one from the other. Many tasks and multiple interruptions typically are a blend or mixture of personal and company business. Because of longer and longer work hours, days and weeks, it has become necessary to integrate our personal/private and our professional/public lives.²⁹ Having cell phones, lap tops, palm pilots, blackberries, iPods and portable DVDs enhance this integration. The introduction and advancement of wireless technology also promotes multitasking. The trend to integrate home and work

activities is irreversible and soon managing interruptions will disappear and become part and parcel of what is expected of and required as normal management routine.³⁰

E-MAIL AND ELECTRONIC ETIQUETTE

We now live in an instant messaging society. E-mailing has become a way of life for most workers. Many employees today spend several hours a day e-mailing messages on a terminal. Time in front of and working on a computer can be 6-8 hours a day or longer. While working on our computer, we now are notified instantly when a new message arrives. E-mail etiquette is such that replies are expected within the day if not sooner.³¹ Even if you are out of the office, out of town, or out of the country, people expect you to have access to your electronic messages from anywhere and everywhere, and they still expect a response within 24 hours. Faxes and overnight deliveries are also available to enable this 24 hours response time expectation. Many workers are required to carry beepers and pagers to that they can reply to information requests within an hour. This is true of not just doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, but it has become commonplace for many other white, blue and pink collar workers. In fact, if you don't own a lap top and/or cell phone, you might not get hired for an increasing number of high information demand jobs.³²

Even in our personal home lives, electronic communication systems have changed the way we live and communicate.³³ Many people today screen home telephone messages with some sort of answering device or service. Television is now via cable or satellite. We are now able to telephone people and pay our bills via computers. Entertainment and games are electronic. All of the electronic devices previously mentioned at work are also available for home usage. Managing task interruptions, often electronic, has engulfed us now both at work and at home.³⁴

EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT

Democratic governance is spreading both nationally and organizationally. Management theory and practice over the last five decades have moved away from autocracy to democracy under the labels of Theory Y, participatory management, concern for people, 9-9-9 grid style, stewardship, servant leadership, et al. Today, the most widely used term to describe this phenomenon is employee empowerment.³⁵ In theory, two heads are better than one, and workers not managers know best how to

perform their jobs. Instead of supervisors telling subordinates what to do, knowledge-based work excels more when this information flow is reversed.³⁶

Information is most useful when it is shared. The same is true of knowledge. Since knowledge is power, information sharing is both knowledge sharing and power sharing.³⁷ Employee empowerment is based upon the efficient and effective use of information and data. As mentioned before, information is nourishment. Similar to food, information freshness is vital and nutritious if current, but often useless if dated or old. Having information in a timely and early fashion necessitates the management of interruptions. Many times, information that is even only a few minutes old is no longer helpful to a cause. Frequent examples are critical surgery decisions, the timing of stock trades, and/or the placement of game bets.

SHIFT FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC RIGHTS

There is a major shift in thinking going on in America today and it involves an evolution away from private to public rights. Both general thinking and court law are increasingly supporting the cultural concept that "the public has the right to know."³⁸ It should be pointed out here that this is a uniquely American phenomenon, and more specifically, it is confined to only the United States of America till date, the leading democracy and free nation in the world.

"The public has the right to know" is evident in laws requiring the opening of all state records and national documents, the latter of which may involve a time delay interval. If tax money is involved, courts usually support the release of public-organization-gathered information. Court trials, especially those involving entertainment and sports celebrities, often are broadcasted today on radio and television. Public officials are expected to lead transparent lives both in work and home conduct and affairs.

This does not mean that privacy rights are being eliminated in the U. S. But many critics argue that they are being infringed upon. New laws passed since 9/11 in an attempt to enhance homeland security have enabled federal agencies to increasingly invade our homes, computer records, and personal lives.³⁹ To the extent that this is done, managing information and communication interruptions is the process being used. This illustrates that controlling communications is not always something that is done to us inadvertently by others. Sometimes we purposively plan to engage in it ourselves as we attempt to observe, monitor and control the behavior of subordinates, clients,

customers, suspects, family members, and others.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Managing time and work today must be accomplished recognizing that interruptions of various kinds are going to take place. The need for instant information makes personal performance more stressful and demanding than in the past. The expectation of quick decision making and problem solving has increased over the years and continues to grow.⁴¹ Managers today need to

envision information as nourishment and to provide this sustenance. In reference to an interruptions typology, managers in the 21st century must try to minimize negative unexpected work flows in the form of intrusions, social gossip and emergencies. At the same time, affirmative expected interruptions in the form of gathering information, listening and deliberations about implemented courses of action must be both tolerated and encouraged.⁴² Oddly and unseemingly, information interruptions can actually make management run more smoothly in today's fast-paced, digital work environment.

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