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Overcome Distractions at Work and Accomplish More

By Natalie Gahrmann, *The Priority Pro*, MA, PCC, CUCG

Communication technologies were supposed to make working lives run more smoothly but actually prevent people from getting critical tasks accomplished. Interruptions consume 28 percent of the average work day -- roughly \$650 billion each year. Overall satisfaction for completing a job well is reduced because of distractions and interruptions, causing frustration, anger and stress. It can even take a toll on quality relationships. To better handle distractions and overcome them, first identify yours: what causes you to lose focus at work? At home?

In an informal survey of 500 managers at every level of corporate management conducted by Natalie Gahrmann of N-R-G Coaching Associates, the top distractions in the US work place were uncovered.

E-mail was identified as the number one offender. Most people complain of burgeoning in-boxes from recipients expecting an instant response, address lists including unnecessary recipients, and large volumes of unsolicited e-mails. Our society places a high value and unrealistic expectations on immediate access and response. Taming e-mail requires training senders to use better judgment when sending e-mails: minimize the number of words in a message, be more descriptive in the subject line to summarize the gist of the message or action needed, make action requests clear, and determine who needs to receive the message rather than copying everyone.

It wasn't long ago that SPAM mail was the biggest e-mail problem, however, with added filters and spam-blockers the numbers have decreased thus making it a little easier to manage. Fortunately, these messages are easy to spot and can be deleted pretty quickly.

Regrettably, the number of e-mails received on an average day continues to increase.

Better management of the inbox and improved decision-making will help. Also, putting some systems in place to help you manage your e-mail overload will make a recognizable difference. Here are a couple of quick tips:

- Only check e-mail at defined times each day.
- Train subordinates to only send e-mails that pertain to you.
- Answer briefly while providing context upfront in your message as to the nature of your reply.
- Send out delayed responses by inserting a scheduled delay in when your typed response will actually be sent.
- Ignore it and trust that if it's important you'll hear about it again.
- Organize your follow-up list and respond based on priority.

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Text messages, instant messaging and online chat (frequently used in some work environments as a communication tool) are often over-used; some are in the form of pop-up boxes that immediately open when the message arrives. The Internet and the ease to search for hours on end is a frequent offender both at home and at work.

The best way to manage these is to prevent them in the first place -- managing expectations in an age of instant access is a challenge but possible with clear indications of when and how these will be handled.

Telephone calls are another big distraction in our lives. When focusing on the task-at-hand, most people feel the need to pick-up the ringing phone whether it's the cell phone or standard office line. Calls can come from coworkers, customers, patients, your boss, and family, friends and personal service providers (e.g., doctor, lawyer, accountant, auto mechanic, real estate agent). It's easy to say "just don't answer the phone" or "turn the ringer off" during focus times, it's another thing to put this into practice. As long as your caller has an opportunity to leave a voice message, they will do so and you can call back at a more convenient time.

Although the above distractions were identified most frequently, other distractions interfere with productivity and job satisfaction, including:

Shifting Priorities. As John F. Kennedy said, "The one unchangeable certainty is that nothing is certain or unchangeable." Thus changing priorities presents numerous challenges for the workforce. With change being so prevalent in the work place, being able to multitask, switch gears or re-prioritize has become quite commonplace. Crisis-of-the-day management techniques rarely work long-term in achieving individual and corporate goals. The best method for handling a change of priorities is to understand before acting, ask questions, re-prioritize, and respond rather than react.

Too Much to Do. Many people complain of having too much on their plate. With a heavy workload you may feel like you never get caught up. Too many projects, unrealistic deadlines and ineffective resources contribute to many feeling overwhelmed. Getting better organized, being able to set priorities or saying "no" can help you better manage everything on your plate.

Multitasking has been proven to be an ineffective technique for managing everything vying for your attention -- separate the urgent from the important and decide what really needs your time and attention.

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Meetings. Hours can be wasted in meetings, especially those that have no clear agenda or purpose. The best meetings have the right people present, a good facilitator, a clear agenda, and specific action steps.

The **environment** can be very disturbing when you are trying to concentrate. This includes a messy office, disorganized files or desktop, excess noise, poor lighting, offensive odors, an uncomfortable chair, improper temperature. Office ergonomics play a huge role in productivity and efficiency. Lack of privacy in many offices or open office space tends to provide a noisier atmosphere than most would prefer. Keep your working space neat and well organized. Control what you can in your work environment. Find ways to minimize the distraction from things totally out of your control.

Technology Issues. Problems with non-functioning or poorly functioning equipment cause frustration and stress in addition to wasted time. If you've ever had your computer freeze up or lose power before you have the chance to save files, you know about this distraction. Printers out of toner, server issues and hard drive crashes are not always preventable but some planning and regular back-ups could prevent any loss.

Mental Attitude. How you think determines your actions and behavior. When you have negative self-talk such as "I can't do this" or "I'm not smart enough," you are prevented from performing at optimal levels. Limiting beliefs result in poor performance. A positive attitude will help you accomplish more. Limiting needless worry, stress, frustration and concern will help you stay focused.

Personal Needs. Not tending to your physical, safety, social or achievement needs effects your ability to concentrate and contribute at work. Health issues, whether yours, your loved ones or a colleague all effect your focus on your work, as well. Addictions such as smoking, caffeine, workaholism also play a role in productivity. Tending to your needs diminishes the distractions caused by ignoring them.

Improper training. Having the competence to perform your work will help you focus on the tasks-at-hand. However, being in the wrong job for your skill set will be very non-productive. Some jobs are a better match for you than others. Working in a position that taps into your strengths will help you succeed and be less distracted by embarrassment, ego, fear, frustration or other emotions that may interfere with job performance.

Distractions and interruptions are all around you but by recognizing what causes you to lose focus can help you become more productive by directly address the causes.

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About the Author:

Natalie Gahrmann is an internationally certified professional coach and leadership development expert who works with organizations to underscore the causes of stress and productivity issues and teach their employees how to better self-manage their burgeoning workload – in all aspects of their lives. She delights in helping entrepreneurs, executives, and SuperBusySM Parents balance their work and personal life, achieve better results, and create more fulfillment and congruency in their life. She is the author of the award winning, “Succeeding as a Super Busy Parent” and “Tools for Creating Success, Fulfillment and Balance in your Work, Family and Personal Life”. Natalie has helped thousands of people through individual & group coaching, workshops & keynote presentations, on-line advice, a regular column in Moms Business Magazine, Parenting and Manpower Inc., and her free e-newsletter. To learn more about how coaching can help you or to arrange an introductory coaching session, contact natalie@theprioritypro.com. To subscribe to the free e-newsletter, visit online at www.theprioritypro.com.