
How can I minimize office distractions?

With fewer employees working in traditional four-walled offices and more working in cubicles, carving out a personal space is more problematic than ever. You can minimize routine distractions to help you work more productively. Here are some tips:

If you are distracted by office activity, speak up! If your desk is in the path of frequent hallway conversations, put your complaint on the agenda of your next team meeting and ask for your team members' cooperation in keeping the noise level down. If a supervisee routinely interrupts you for advice, schedule time each day to meet and to hold questions until then. Make it a part of his or her performance plan to become more self-sufficient. If a talkative co-worker comes to visit every day after lunch, let him or her know you are working on an important project. Offer to catch up when you are finished or after work hours. Make these suggestions civilly, but firmly, and stick to them. As a last resort, consider a small, tasteful sign outside your cube, "Project deadline, please do not disturb!"

Create interruption-free time. Let your office friends know when you have an impending deadline and do not have time to talk. Rather than trying to make time as you go, try scheduling blocks of time on your calendar when you can work uninterrupted. To avoid distractions, adjust your schedule to work on important tasks during off-peak hours, such as after hours or when co-workers are at lunch.

Schedule your tasks and stick to your schedule. Distractions can come from within, too. When you are overwhelmed, it is easy to flit from one pile of papers to the next. You may look busy but you are probably not getting anything done. Stick to a task until you can put it in your "done" box. If it is too large for one sitting, try breaking it down into smaller chunks.

Plan time for e-mail and voice mail. The lure of a blinking voice-mail light or e-mail box can be hard to resist. Avoid getting sidetracked by new messages. Instead, plan two or three times each day to handle e-mail and voice mail. If you cannot deal with an e-mail or voice mail immediately, file it (paper or electronically) with a due date and include it on your to-do list. Follow the motto "Touch paper once." Deal with it immediately; file it with an expiration date; or dispose of it.

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