

Transcription - Managing Interruptions

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. In the next few podcasts, we're going to revisit some topics that, way back in 2017 for those of you who are long-standing listeners, you'll understand and perhaps remember that in 2017, we did a review series called 20 Questions. And as a result of looking back at that, we found a couple of topics that we haven't revisited, even though we promised that we would at that stage.

So the first one we're going to talk about today is "how do I deal with interruptions at work whether they're good or bad"? And we talked very briefly about that in 2017 when we were answering the questions. But today we're going to talk about, first of all, the annoying interruptions, how do you deal with the annoying interruptions? And then we'll go on to interruptions that would be considered "good interruptions". And we might even let Fulyana explain what they are when we get to that point because for me, every interruption is a irritation, is a bad interruption. So let's hear how she deals with bad interruptions at work.

So I look at interruptions at work, if I'm to be honest and look at myself, I think I've been guilty of interrupting others, and they could have been construed as bad interruptions. In general, I love being interrupted at work, but if I look deeper, I think the worst and most annoying interruption is self-interruptions. I think that that's the worst. And what that is, is when you just can't focus on what you're doing, you get distracted, as soon as you hear a ping, as soon as you have to check, or something comes to mind, you stop what you're doing and follow that. To me, that's easy to deal with in one way, because it's being disciplined, it's saying to yourself, so I know what's causing that, it's irritating, it's not very productive and then saying to yourself, "All right, from now on, I will turn all the notifications off for that hour. I will not look at another device or whatever."

So you need to come up with strategies that work for you, and those could mean that they'll be an hour that I'm going to do this task and nothing and no one can interrupt. The interruptions are a bit different now to back in 2017, when most people were in an office and people walked in and out. That had to be dealt with differently. It's like, I've got an open-door policy, yes, but please let's show each other respect and consideration, just because you're ready for a chat that other person might not be, or it's immediate for you, but not for the other person. So think before you do it, and if people are doing that to you, whether you're in a managerial position and you have a team or just colleagues, just say, please, this hour is mine. I'd like to concentrate.

I'm the sort of person, I like first thing in the morning, I liked to get in before anyone used to be in an office. That's how I dealt with it. Other people might say, "Just before lunch unless we're at the meeting, 11 to 12, I'm not interruptable, unless it's an emergency." But put some ground rules in place.

Not unsurprisingly, for me, I'm going to say you need to be structured, you need to be organised. And what I find works for me is that, as I've mentioned before, I do a weekly list. I don't do very detailed lists, but I do have a list that is Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc. I'll have things in that list and I know that by doing that list, it sometimes gives me an indication of a time where I will have uninterrupted opportunity to do things that need that focus. Then I

will apply the 50/20/50 rule, which I've also talked about before, which is 50 minutes of uninterrupted, absolute focus on one task, 20 minutes off to do something else, and then 50 minutes to go back and do the first task. What that gives you is a two-hour block of time that is dedicated to something that you have made uninterruptable. Now, whether you transpose that to say that you do it every day, if you need it every day, or you look for a time a week, or a fortnight, or a month, and you let other people know. This stuff, this management of your time, doesn't matter, really, whether you're in an office or not, or you're working from home because these are activities that you can manage, regardless of where your work is based. It's about knowing the time that you've got, knowing when you work best, as Fulyana said, she works best in the morning, so do I, but identifying that time that is best for you, that you want as uninterrupted time, as focused time, and then when you've got that, you then remind yourself that you do have uninterrupted time.

So if you're getting interruptions the rest of the work week, just roll with it, because you know you've got that uninterrupted time where you can focus on something else that you feel needs uninterrupted time. I think that we shy away from being too organized, because we think, "Oh, we've got this responsibility, we've got that, we've got the team, it needs me, I have to be there, I can't do this, I can't do this, I have to be accessible all of the time."

But if you're a manager of anything, whether it's people or activities, you still need to know that when focused time is required, you've got a block of time that you can fit that in and you've got a way of managing that time as well. That's why I talk about the 50/20/50, because it's not just about identifying a time where you can be uninterrupted, and let everyone know that that's the time where they can't interrupt you, but it's also about using that time wisely and being structured about that time. So that, as Fulyana said, you don't interrupt yourself with other things, you don't sit down for 15 minutes and think, "Oh, I've got to remember, I've got to do that thing, for that thing. Put everything out of your head, this is what I'm doing. And in that, if you're writing something, or if you're reading something, you don't worry about the punctuation or the structure or that the words are in the right order, or that it makes sense. If you're writing something, you just write it all down, get out of your head, and onto the laptop or the paper, whatever you're using. I went to say paper, because that's always what I would use. Then you have a timer, so that at 50 minutes the timer goes off, and you stop if you're in mid-sentence, if you're in mid-letter, it doesn't matter, but you stop, you put the pen down, you put the keyboard down, whatever else it is. You get up, and you walk around, and you do something else entirely for 20 minutes, you let the timer go off again, and you sit back down and you pick up where you left off. You will find when you use that system, even if you don't think it's going to work for you, that it gives you some thinking structure, so that you will find a system that works for you.

Do you wanted me to cover a bit more on welcome interruptions? (Yes.) I think they're kind of vary from person to person, obviously, but to me, sometimes you already know, if you know how before I said, "Do not look at other emails or text or whatever," or phone calls, however, if you are waiting on an outcome for something that will give you space once you know the result, then that is a good interruption. So you know that something, a decision, is coming at 10 o'clock, and you're in the middle of whatever you do, you will make it so that you know, "Oh, this is so-and-so ringing me. It's about that, I will pick it up, because I know what it's about, and it's a good interruption." Even if the news is bad, it's still an interruption. I need to know that, because it affects other things this morning. So to me, that's a good interruption.

Another one is when people come in, and they're absolutely excited whether they're coming in through an email, a text, or phone call, or in person, and they're definitely excited to share something, that is a good interruption. Now, I'm not just talking about good news, that same person who you worked with and you know how they behave, if they come in because they have a problem, that is a good interruption, because if you stop and help them, and own the problem together and fix it as early as possible, that's a good thing. So, again, knowing your environment, knowing your people, whether they're team members, whether they're customers, whether they're suppliers, it's their behaviour and interaction, will help you to a degree, figure out what's a good and not so good interruption.

Perhaps the other exercise that might be useful is for you to write down what you think an interruption is. What do you classify as an interruption? Is it the same person that's coming in all of the time? And that becomes something that you need to address in a different way. It's not an interruption, it's a human resource management issue. So, then reacting to the interruptions, it's about looking at your reaction to the interruption, why are you classifying it as an interruption? Is it because you're frustrated with yourself because you know that it's going to take you away from the thing that you should be doing? Then how long do you allow for the interruptions? How often do you allow yourself to be interrupted before you say, well I'm not just going to do this, I'm just going to put this off for another day, you know, if you're doing a particular task? It's about your own management of what you're classifying as an interruption.

I'm always going to say put down a list. So, do yourself a list. Who is it? What are the interruptions about? Because if they're interruptions about a work process, or you know where does this decision go next? Or something that is about a management issue that you really need to address, or is an emerging issue that you haven't needed to address, you know, it might be that I've been using a particular software package and Airtable is my go-to example at the moment, because there is a limit on how many records you can put in Airtable. And if you've been using it and the group's been using it for ages and ages, and suddenly you reach that limit, then it's not just a decision about how will we manage this data that we're so used to doing in this way. It's a financial decision as well because the next step is a financial investment in the next level of using that system.

I think it's important to not just look at the surface of the interruption, but what it is, what it's telling you about the work environment, and about your management style, your skills, then the people that are with you as well.

Few things there for you to think about in terms of interruptions. Of course, I'll put my things first. Do your list. Do your interruption lists. Find some time to have uninterrupted time that works for you in terms of your headspace. I think what Fulyana said very much earlier in the discussion, about welcoming interruptions because it is telling you, it is information, and it is coming to you. But the people in your workspace might decide that they are unsure about interrupting you, so they won't tell you. They let things fester or they hide it or they do a solution that is not the solution that you would have considered the right solution to do. So I think that we have to get the mindset around what an interruption is for you and what it's telling you, don't just classify it as an interruption and be aggravated by it. What is it? Why is it happening? Who is it that's bringing it to you? What can you do to resolve it so that it doesn't become a continuing interruption?

You reminded me of something because when you talked about the person, I remember working with someone for many years, a colleague from another part of the organisation. If you ask me to label, I'll never call it an interruption, but to label that person, I would label him as energy boost because every time he came to visit or have an interaction by phone or whatever, it was always, sort of made you feel more energized the way he communicated, you know, in the way he shared information. So to me, yeah, that's another thing, you made me think about people, the individual, the, you know, regulars and so on. Manage yourself better by knowing is this person going to suck my time up and it's going to be two minutes work stuff and 15 minutes waste. So you need to, again, do it in a way that is positive, professional, respectful and still manage that, that you're not taking 15 wasted minutes.

I do think it's important to recognise, both for yourself and for the person, if you find that it's one person that's doing it all the time. I'm reminded of a time and motion study that I did many, many years ago now on someone who was in an organisation and they, the organisation, couldn't work out why he needed to work such long hours because what he was doing was not really, wasn't really required to interact with the rest of the human resources that were there. It was very much an IT or computer function that he needed to do. When I sat there and did the time and motion study, I discovered that one person visited, in a six hour period, came to see him 38 times and it sticks in my mind because that was just so extraordinary. And neither of them recognised that that was happening because they were so focused on what they were doing. The problem really was for the person who was coming to do the interruption because he was located physically on a floor below where this other person was, so it was a much longer period of time that he was always away from his desk when he was doing this. He wasn't comfortable about phoning. We had the internal phone system before we had instant messaging and things like that, but he wasn't comfortable about using the phone because he wanted to show the other person a bit of paper and say, "Is this going to work? Is that going to work?" They were working on Excel spreadsheets at the time. What it highlighted in terms of me doing the review was that there was this one person who was unsure of his input and needed reassurance, for the time, that he was on the right path, doing the right thing. So there needed to be some more structure about the activity that he was doing and a formal review time, so that he could save up all of his questions, even if it was once a day, but he could save up all of his questions because they weren't questions that relied on the answer to let him do the next stage. It was just about general information. But it also highlighted that they needed to be physically located closer together. It was an open plan office and for the person that I did the time and motion study on, he really needed an office. He needed a secluded area where he could close a door because in an open plan office, everyone thinks you can talk to everyone else, even though there's barriers and things up. There was no physical warning for anyone else to say, just stop and think about the interruption before you go past, go through the third wall. I throw that up as another example of the things that you need to think about.

I think we've probably reviewed that quite nicely and covered things that we didn't get a chance to talk to all those years ago. If you have found a way that you deal with interruptions that works for you, we'd be happy to share that with our other listeners. For now, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.