



## Interruptus Contageous

-Mark Haeussler, CEO

"Quick question...", spoken from someone standing at our office door. The interruption seems innocuous. But it is not. The Latin root of the word interrupt is *rupt*, meaning to *burst*. Thus, an interruption bursts our thinking. It is an unseen contagion, and these cost us time and mental energy.



A recent Harvard Business Review found that 40% of respondents *were interrupted more than 10 times* during their day, with another 15% reporting 20 daily interruptions. These mental intrusions can sound benign, such as, "I am just dropping off that report you needed," to, "I need to ask you some quick questions..." These *burst* the continuity of our thoughts and actions.

The troublesome fact about disruptions is that they require a long time to recover: *8-25 minutes is needed to recuperate, depending on the complexity of the task and thinking*. The recovery is particularly difficult if the topic is different from the current one being worked. Social scientists at UC Irvine have investigated interruptions, and their insight is that we also interrupt *ourselves*. Interruptions are 60% external, 40% *internal*. Unwittingly, attention deficit disorder (ADD) may be baked into our culture. Modern technology interrupts us so often that we do not realize how "normal" it is; this is the paradox of technology helping productivity while simultaneously hindering it.

Disruptions, even in moments when we think it is benign, is a form of disrespect. And men interrupt women 33 percent more often compared to when men speak with other men (George Washington University). Beyond the practical implications of time lost, unless it truly is urgent, is discourteous.

What *actions* will you do to defend your own state of flow? What barriers will you place to preserve time for work that requires your complete attention? Start with closing your door (with a do-not-disturb note on it) or block time on your calendar where you are not available. Then, defend it. Have a plan of how you will get back to your task and thoughts when you are interrupted. For example, if you are interrupted while typing a report, tell the other person to wait a moment, keep typing your last thought, and then type keywords of where your next thought was headed. After you tend to a valid interruption, then do a reset; stand up, look out a window, or even walk around the office or outside briefly to clear your head.

Commit that you will respect and defend *other* people's state of flow. And, if you tend to interrupt *other* people, well, just stop it. Use interruptions as a last resort, and even if you think you are being gentle, view them as a pounding on the door of the other person's brain. What is a practice you can be in to reduce interferences of your own space, and how will you shift away from interrupting others?

One last thought is the antonym of interruptions, *flow*: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who studies and writes on flow, says this about those moments where people are in this state and its connection to meaning:

*The happiest people spend much time in a state of flow - the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.*