

12 Tips to Help You Manage Those Time Wasting Distractions

By Ute Wieczorek-King and Gerry Hyde

Many people have the best intentions to focus on their work, but end up spending valuable time on small, unproductive and time wasting activities that take them well away from what they should be doing. With procrastination being a common reason for this, there are many other outside distractions that can interrupt our focus and sabotage our progress. One of the problems can be being unsure what to prioritise and focus on, as well as what not to focus on.

If you are prone to being distracted it may be useful to have a “Not To Do List”- a list that records all your time wasting activities or habits which stop you from being productive.

Typical time wasters or time stealers can be: Telephone interruptions, random use of email, inadequate planning and lack of priorities, trying to do too much, unexpected visitors, lack of organisation and paperwork handling, saying yes, when you should say no, doing housework or socialising during office hours; attending meetings without clear purpose, unnecessary travel. Do you know what your time stealers are?



Here is a list of 12 tips to help you take control of your time stealers:

1. Keeping a Time Log

For at least 2 to 3 days, record every interruption from your normal work, regardless of what it is. By printing and filling in pages from an online calendar that has half hour time slots (can be found in Outlook or Word) you will discover where your time goes and the kind of time wasting activities you are dealing with. You could also try using the website www.myhours.com which is an extremely useful free timetracking site.

Whilst keeping a time log can seem time consuming and something you may think you don't have time for, it can be quite an eye opening exercise! Since our memory can be poor in helping us assess where we waste time on a daily basis, it can be alarming to 'see' the length of time we spend on email, talking on the phone, surfing or using social networking sites.

So completing a time log can help you be more aware of your time wasting activities, and with a higher level of awareness you may be much more motivated to stop the distractions, and change how or what you spend your time on.

2. Setting a Goal for the Day

Every morning before you start to work, decide what you wish to achieve that day and review the goal or goals at lunchtime to check you are on track. This provides you with a stronger 'pull' that will help you stay more focused.

3. Deciding on Prime Work Time

Whether you are at your best in the morning, afternoon or evening, make sure you use this prime time to schedule tasks that require a high level of concentration and energy.

Block that time in your diary or Outlook calendar, use your answer phone for incoming calls, log out of your email and other distracting programs, and decide to work without interruptions for a set amount of time. You can achieve a lot in a couple of uninterrupted hours!

This will save you time in the long run as getting back on track after having been interrupted can apparently take anything up to 15 minutes depending on the task involved.

4. Dealing with E-mails

Try to arrange routine times for e-mails. Turning off the 'new mail' alert is a good idea. Very few business people need to see and respond to their email instantly, and for most people checking mail 2-3 times a day should be enough. You can always read emails between tasks, or use low energy times such as after lunch.

Give yourself a set amount of time to deal with email, and make sure you have a priority system that allows you to respond to those that do need an answer straight away. This will make sure you stop thinking about them. (More email tips will be covered in a separate 'Email Management' article)



5. Dealing with Phone Calls

When you have several calls to make, it is best to group them and keep the conversations brief and to the point. Don't allow social calls to interrupt your work. If you were in a big office you probably wouldn't be dealing with your social calls during work hours.

Again, use voicemail to take calls during busy times. If you really can't avoid answering calls, it can be useful to have a polite response ready to tell people you are busy and this is not a good time to talk. A simple 'How can I help you?' will keep the conversation focused or 'Can we chat later? I am working to a deadline' will signal that you are willing to talk at another time - just remember to call them back at the agreed time.

6. Managing Interruptions by Setting Boundaries

Working from home can have many distractions and it is important to be clear with family and friends that when you are working you don't have time for them to just call by for a coffee because they know you will be there. They wouldn't dream of doing this without scheduling a convenient time if you were in an office. If you have children let them know that when your office door is shut you cannot be disturbed.

7. Sticking to Office Hours

To control your time on work days you have to set some boundaries. Whilst enjoying the freedom of working from home it can all be too tempting to allow 'work' time to mix with 'housework' time, 'me' time, 'family' time, or other 'social' time. Some people choose to fit in non work related activities but this will essentially only work if you add the work time you've lost, somewhere else. Constantly blurring boundaries can be quite difficult to manage, and it can be more effective to carry out any non work-related activities after your work, or at weekends.

8. Avoiding Lengthy Internet Surfing and Social Networking

It is very easy to become distracted when researching on the internet or visiting social network sites. During your working day set specific times of the day for this as well as definite time limits. Make sure you have clear business goals for your social networking activities. It is sometimes easier to concentrate on these in the evening or during free time.

9. Insufficient Client Briefing

When taking a briefing from a client for a piece of work, ask thorough questions to make sure you understand what is required of you, and that you are comfortable with the task and able to action the request. Inadequate, inaccurate or delayed information from others can lead to numerous unnecessary phone calls and time wasting.

10. Meetings

Meetings, both scheduled and unscheduled can take up a considerable amount of time. Where possible, have a structured agenda and clarify at the beginning of the meeting how long you have. Remember to factor in travel time – this can help you decide if you really have to meet or whether a phone call or conference call could suffice!



11. Inability to Say “No”

It is all too easy to take on board more and more work and not be able to say “no”. With a structured to-do list, it is much simpler to see what is possible to achieve and be able to give a realistic response to whether you can accept the task and fit it into your workload.

12. Involvement in Routine

It is easy to become too involved in the routine and detail of a task – remember sometimes it is easier to delegate or outsource elements of tasks that take you away from what you are best at!

What works for Ute:

I manage multiple projects and the only way I can prevent getting side tracked is by starting my day with a clear focus, a goal, my up to date to-do list and my email being off line until I have completed some key tasks. I find email and other online activities most distracting and I try never to have more than two or three programmes or windows open when online. Leaving my desk briefly at regular intervals enables me to clear my mind, refocus and ignore any distractions when I return.

What works for Gerry:

When I am working on a task I like to be completely focussed. With the nature of my job I am unable to switch off my phone or e-mail, however I do monitor my calls and only glance at e-mails when I need full concentration and respond only to urgent enquiries. Most important for me is setting boundaries so family and friends know and respect my working hours and I am able to give them my full attention when I am not in the office.

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