

Effort Activity 4 – Disruption Cost and Deep Work

Gloria Mark, a professor at the University of California Irvine, is particularly interested in examining what she calls disruption cost; the amount of time or energy we lose because of interruptions to our work. (*Gloria Mark, Daniela Gudith and Ulrich Klocke, 'The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress', University of California, Irvine and Humboldt University, Germany*)

The observation she makes is this: if you're disrupted during work, you lose the number of seconds the disruption took – maybe thirty seconds if someone stops to say hello and exchange a few words – but you also lose something else too.

In one experiment Mark ran, she gave university students an email inbox to work through. Then she had actors interrupt them as they tried to work. One group of students had no interruptions, other groups had varying types of disruption. Then she times how long it took the students to complete their inbox task.

Here's what she found – *all students completed the tasks in the roughly same amount of time*; just over twenty minutes.

Hang on, you might be thinking, doesn't that disprove Mark's ideas about disruption cost? Well, here's what she did next – she measured the levels of certain feelings in the participants: 'stress' 'frustration,' 'time pressure,' 'workload' and tiredness because of task-directed 'effort'. And she discovered that the students who'd been interrupted felt significantly higher levels of all of these. They got the task done in the same time because they powered through, but, as Mark writes, "...people in the interrupted conditions experienced a higher workload, more stress, higher frustration, more time pressure, and effort."

Avoiding Distraction Cost - Introducing Deep Work

One way you can avoid all the bad things associated with disruption – all the frustration and pressure – is to design study sessions differently. Rather than interrupt yourself by switching topics, or stressing yourself out by working in places where you'll get distracted or disrupted, you can organise your study so you **work deeply and with concentrated effort, on the same thing for a period of time.**

In his book *Deep Work*, the academic Cal Newport argues that tricky, demanding tasks require us to work deeply. By 'deep work' he means work that is challenging; that requires extended periods of effortful concentration and hard thinking. When we sequence periods of deep work, we minimise distraction cost and lower our levels of stress and frustration – and as a result, we get more done.

Begin by making a list of possible deep work tasks. Choose tasks that are going to require high levels of effort – tasks you'd love to get done without distraction or stress:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now timetable a deep work study session, and attach a tricky task to it. The table below might help you plan it out:

Deep work topic:		
What exactly do I need to get done? <i>(the more detail here, the better)</i>		
Date:	Start time:	End Time:
Location(s): <i>(choose somewhere where you'll minimise distraction cost. Some students we work with like changing location mid-way through their session; the movement gives them energy and focus)</i>		
Reward: <i>(do something good to celebrate!)</i>		

You could do a deep work session every week and begin a high-effort habit. Soon you'll find you can get more done – your feelings of control will go up, and you'll feel lower levels of stress and pressure.

That can only be a good thing.