

One thing that gets in the way of effective time management is disruptions. Whether these disruptions come in the form of people approaching your desk, a phone call or email, they all prevent us from managing our time and getting things done. Disruptions can be frustrating, and we often waste a lot of time dealing with them.

There are a lot of ideas out there on how to deal with disruptions, but before you manage or minimize them, it's a good idea to find out where they are coming from and why.

Each time you get disrupted (meaning each time you have to stop a task because your attention is drawn away) fill in the Disruptions Log. Here is what to record:

- Time – What time did the disruption occur?
- Type - What exactly was the disruption?
- Action – How did you deal with the disruption?
- Why – Was the disruption valid or urgent?
- Duration – How long did it take to deal with the disruption?
- Impact – What was the impact of the disruption on you?
- Reflection – How would you manage the disruption differently next time?

Do this for at least one day, preferably up to five days and then analyse the data. Look for trends and also look at how much time you have spent dealing with disruptions. Use the data to proactively put fixes in place to reduce or remove as many disruptions as you can. This will go a long way in improving your time management, so you are more focused and productive.

Tips for getting the most value recording a personal disruption log.

- Record as much detail as possible about the disruptions.
- Update your log as a disruption occurs – don't try and remember all the disruptions at the end of the day.

Day 1 – Example Answer

Time	What was the disruption?	How did I deal with the disruption?	Was it valid or urgent?	How long did it take to deal with it?	What was the impact of the disruption?	What would I do differently next time?
08.40	Colleague stopped at my desk to say hello.	I had a quick chat with them.	No	10 mins	Was nice to have a chat, but I had just started working through my emails for the day, so it stopped me and then I had to remember where I was up to.	Suggest we catch up at lunchtime.
09.25	LinkedIn notification on my phone.	I quickly looked at the notification and commented on it.	No	10 mins	It broke my concentration on the presentation that I was writing. Then it was hard to start back again. I then went and made a coffee as I was already distracted.	Turn off notifications during the workday and check at the end of the day.
10.05	Personal phone call.	Took the call.	No	15 mins	I was still trying to write my presentation, so it stopped me and made it harder to start back again.	Not answer the call and check the voicemail/call back when I had completed my work.

10.15	Numerous email notifications.	Checked my emails.	No	45 mins	I dealt with the emails and put off working on the presentation that I needed to complete today.	Turn email notifications off. Set up regular times in the day to check my emails – either last 10 minutes of every hour or once I have finished a set task.
11.10	Phone call from my manager.	Took the call.	Yes	30 mins	I had to stop working on the presentation. They did give me information that I needed for the presentation, but it meant I had to re-write some areas as I was originally off-track.	I should have asked for the information I needed earlier, allowing time for my manager to respond and ensure I received it before starting my work.
11.35	Ambulance siren outside.	I looked to see if I could see the ambulance and what was going on.	No	2 mins	It did interrupt me but as it was quick, I was able to get straight back into what I was doing.	I should try to ignore the sirens.
12.10	Colleague stopped at my desk to ask for help with a project.	I stopped what I was doing to help him.	No	20 min	I had to stop doing my work and it put me behind.	I would ask them to come back at a more suitable time or arrange to have lunch with them to discuss it.
13.30	Urgent email notifications.	I switched task to answer the email.	No	15 min	It stopped me working on what I had planned to work on, but it was an urgent request for a project, so I wanted to answer it.	It wasn't urgent enough that it couldn't have waited until I had finished my work in the next hour. This wouldn't impact my focus if I turned off email notifications and checked emails at specific times.

14.00	Ping from Microsoft Teams.	I went in and checked what the ping was referring to.	No	10 mins	Again, I interrupted my planned work, read the post and then started reading other posts which delayed my work.	Be more disciplined at ignoring pings until I have the time to check them.
14.50	Saw my mentor whilst getting a drink and we had an impromptu catch up.	Spoke to her.	Yes	30 mins	It changed my plans for the next couple of hours and I had to stay back at work, however it can be hard to catch her, and the discussion was helpful for my current and future work.	It would have been more beneficial to schedule the time to meet with her when it was mutually convenient however if I factor time into my days for 'unplanned but important' disruptions, this type of impact may be minimal.
15.05	Social media notifications.	Read them all.	No	15 mins	Delayed my work.	Turn off notifications.
16.05	Email notifications.	Stopped what I was doing to answer the emails.	No	20 mins	It meant I had to stay back at work to complete what I had planned for the day.	None of the emails were urgent, so I should have looked at them when I'd finished my work and decided if they needed responding to or if they could wait until tomorrow.

Analyzing the Disruption Log

My observations:

- I spent around **3.75 hours** dealing with disruptions!
- **75%** of these disruptions **were not valid or urgent!**
- I worked back late as a result of these disruptions
- My focus kept getting interrupted
- I was working reactively rather than managing my time proactively
- There are some clear strategies I can put in place to minimize disruptions
- I need to be more disciplined in managing disruptions
- I can see that if I don't manage disruptions more effectively, I will be regularly working long hours and feeling stressed.

What does your Disruptions Log tell you? Here are some questions to help you critically reflect:

- How much time did you spend on dealing with disruptions throughout the day?
- How much time did you give to disruptions that were not valid or urgent?
- How did these disruptions impact your work?
- Did your work take a lot longer than expected?
- What strategies have you identified to help you manage these more effectively?
- What have you learned from completing this disruption log?

Creating a Disruption Log is the first step to becoming aware of how you actually manage your time. You can't change what you aren't aware of! The time you invest in completing the log will be rewarded as you seek to improve your productivity through better time management practices. Identifying where you are spending too much time (or not enough time) and how disruptions can change your focus and reduce your productivity will help you identify time wasters that don't support your objectives.

Options for keeping a Disruption Log:

Paper and Pencil	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keeps it simple• Makes it portable• Tech-free (so no IT issues or complications)• Easy to capture information in the moment
Spreadsheet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Useful if you are working on a computer most of the day• Design your own spreadsheet to capture what you personally prefer• Set formulas to add up time taken• Split the day into timed sections to make it easier to complete• Easy to update as you go
Tools and Apps	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are a huge range of time management or productivity apps available. Find one that works best for you.• There are many software tools that are also effective. Here is one example. www.rescuetime.com

Tips for overcoming disruptions

- Have a schedule – plan your day (including when you will check emails, social media etc.) and be disciplined in sticking to it.
- Get enough sleep – seven to nine hours is recommended.
- Eat healthy – nutritious, well-balanced food is proven to support focus.
- Use music – listen to motivational music so you aren't distracted by background noise.
- Turn off notifications – schedule time to deal with emails, messages and social media. Control your incoming emails and messages; don't let them control you.
- Turn off your phone – turn it to mute or off when working on an important piece of work.
- Let people know when you don't want to be disturbed – depending on the software you use, change your status to 'Busy' or 'Do Not Disturb' so you cannot be interrupted. Shut your office door or place a red flag on your desk indicating you are trying to focus.
- Optimize your energy levels – identify which time of the day you are the most mentally alert and productive and schedule your most challenging tasks then.
- Be a role model – if you expect people not to interrupt you when you are working, then don't interrupt them.
- Find a quiet space – work in a different place to help you concentrate if needed.