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## Stop the “Hard Stop”

Leaders manage their time and focus their resources by limiting unwanted interruptions

Has anyone noticed that the American workplace has become a veritable shrine to interruptions? Each day, managers arrive at their desks with their current project top-of-mind. And each day, in order to focus long enough to accomplish a single task, they must ignore pages of emails, dismiss an army of subordinates, and shut out a chorus of ringing phones and pinging texts.

The consequences of permitting interruptions to control your business can be disastrous. According to a 2006 study published by the management consultancy Basex, workplace interruptions cost the US economy roughly \$588 billion a year. Whatever your share of that money is, your firm can't afford to lose it to managerial mistakes—especially during a downturn.

No office is immune to the problem, and the majority of employees are affected by it, whether they're the interrupters or the interruptees. The average worker spends roughly 28 percent of their workday—that's more than two hours each day—dealing with and recovering from interruptions. And unit leaders have to fend off more interruptions than anyone else because their ears are always in highest demand. The challenge for leaders is to filter out extraneous requests and remain focused on their primary goal, so that nothing else is allowed to interfere until they are certain their key priority is being addressed.



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### Eyes on the Prize

Of course, a no-interruption policy is only as good as the leader who enforces it. It's all well and good to say, “Don't knock when the door is closed,” but if someone knocks, and you answer, then you're teaching the wrong lesson. As a general rule, when the door is closed leaders should not honor any interruption, except for a true emergency or family crisis.

“Management is largely about interruption,” writes Henry Mintzberg, management professor at McGill University, in an article published in the Wall Street Journal. “But email, and especially BlackBerries ...really make it much worse.”

Cognitive research conducted over the last ten years indicates that the time lost in switching between two tasks is magnified when one of the tasks is unfamiliar or more complicated—a common scenario for the

and clients that you may not be all that serious about the prize to begin with.

Another common obstacle to productivity is the preemptive interruption, or the “hard stop.” Too many critical meetings begin with the phrase, “I only have a half hour,” when a half hour just won't do. If an issue is important enough for a meeting, dedicate the time necessary to get it solved. Piecemeal meetings tend to accomplish little and can actually waste time. Focus real attention on critical matters and don't allow a hard stop to hijack your goals.

At Flaum Partners, we've developed several strategies to keep interruptions at bay. I ask each team member not to take a BlackBerry into our meetings. Their email and missed calls will be waiting for them, whether they like it or not.

I've also learned to ask the same of

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executive interruption. This means that an interruption can cause greater delay than the amount of time required to attend to the original task at hand. The research goes on to say that if a task is actually scheduled with a division or department head, rather than sprung on him or her as an interruption, it will take less time, and in effect, demand fewer resources from management.

And in many cases, an interruption does more than set back the meeting schedule. A poorly timed interruption may undermine the perceived seriousness of your intent, because interruptions not only take your eyes off the prize, they signal to your collaborators

our clients; I suggest to them that if we're going to really drill down on the issues at hand and create solutions, then we will need everyone's complete attention. At that point, I recommend that we all shut off our BlackBerries and mobile phones. It seems a bit audacious at first, but this course of action conveys to everyone how serious we are about making progress on the project. In the end, great leaders develop their own strategies for shutting out the noise. Formulating that strategy needs to become a priority of its own.

Just don't let anyone—or anything—distract you from it. **PE**