

The Open Office Plan: How to Gain Collaboration without Losing Concentration

Help workers confront time bandits and reclaim their focus.

By Edward G. Brown

More and more organizations are embracing open office layouts in an attempt to improve communication, increase collaboration, and cut back on overhead by fitting more workers into less space.

All well and good. Communication, collaboration, and cost savings are worthy pursuits.

But every change has side effects. Workers in open floor plans struggle to focus on their work when activity unfolds nearby. Since the intent of open floor plans is to promote collaboration, it would be ironic if the price were a drop in productivity with workers less able to concentrate.

Our research shows office workers at all levels lose three to five hours of productive time every day due to unwanted, unneeded, and unproductive interruptions. Our polls reveal 93% of workers say “Yes” when asked if they are “often interrupted” at work, with 68% of those interruptions coming

from inside the organization. Face-to-face interruptions account for one-third more interruptions than e-mail or phone calls.

When we asked employees how their inability to defend their own time affected them, they said:

- It reduces my productivity: 66%
- It reduces my efficiency: 77%
- I make more mistakes: 41%
- It creates more stress: 80%
- It diminishes my job satisfaction: 60%

So the question is: How can you help people gain collaboration without losing concentration?

The fix isn't a physical one. It's a matter of changing behavior.

Employees may fear telling the people who steal their time that the interruption is inconvenient. They may think



interruptions aren't detrimental to their work. They may feel they should be flexible enough to tolerate other people changing their priorities for them. Here are the steps to counterbalance those problems.

Know the Cost.

The first step is to help workers understand just how much havoc interruptions cause them personally. They need to calculate, at the end of a normal day, how many interruptions they had and how much time those interruptions "stole" from their day. Ask them to keep a written tally. When workers do so, they're almost always astonished (and horrified) by how much time interruptions steal from them. So that's a critical starting point: Make sure everyone knows the high cost of being interrupted.

Stress the Importance of Confronting Time Bandits.

Next, workers need to realize how vital it is to communicate effectively with time bandits (people who unwittingly steal time by interrupting). Workers need to tell the time bandit directly and clearly not to distract them from their work. It may help them to practice their delivery, anticipating how the time bandit might object and preparing responses to any objections.

Practice Time Locking.

Time locking means carving out a specified period during which someone can work undisturbed on a high-priority, specific, time-managed task that requires undivided attention, interrupted only by true emergencies. It's helpful for leaders to explain the importance of time locking to all employees, to make sure every worker has some locked time every day, and to enforce time locking when it occurs.

Time locking should become a coordinated plan of reciprocal events, with workers covering for the time locker, knowing that they'll get their own turn later. Managers need to oversee the effectiveness of time locks and make sure they're used for appropriate purposes.

Provide Training in Focal Locking.

Most people struggle with concentration anyway, even without interruptions. It's useful to provide training for workers to help them learn to focus. Training in this skill, called focal locking, has been shown to help people learn to concentrate regardless of the environment around them.

“Workers report losing three to five hours of productive time every day.”

“Most people struggle with concentration anyway, even without interruptions.”

Of course, it's not a one-and-done training event. No behavioral change is. It needs to be managed, practiced, refreshed, and reinforced. Once workers have reclaimed their time and discovered how liberating it is, they'll be on board to help embed the new behaviors into the tapestry of their daily lives. [S](#)

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It's about Time

For more about helping workers reclaim productive time, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

The Key to a Productive Workforce (Vol. 32, No. 2)

A Three-Step Approach to Managing Workplace Stress (Vol. 22, No. 1)

Take Back Your Time (Vol. 31, No. 2)

How to Present Training Workshops that Educate and Inspire (Vol. 29, No. 4)

The Overwhelmed Office: Six Fixes for the Stressed-Out, Productivity-Challenged Workplace (Vol. 28, No. 4)