

Maximizing Office Productivity

by Peggy Duncan

Solutions for working smarter and faster

You are the go-to person in the office and the one who is expected to have all the answers. As soon as you get focused on accomplishing a certain task, something else comes up that needs your attention. Often, you don't have time to think, and before you can blink, someone or something presents another challenge. It's the nature of your job.

How do you get things done with so many interruptions and distractions?

You'll have to stop long enough to examine everything you do and develop solutions that will make the work easier. The following examples include analyzing and minimizing interruptions, organizing everything around you, and utilizing new technology to maximize your productivity.

Analyze and Minimize Interruptions

In a March 2009 Omnibus survey commissioned by Advanced American Telephones, maker of AT&T-branded office telephony products, 52 percent of office workers cited interruptions as having the biggest impact on their productivity. To reduce interruptions, you have to analyze each one so you can understand why it happened. Next, develop ways to reduce them and also the time spent handling them.

Step back and take a look at what goes on in your day. What are you spending the most time on? Who interrupts you most often, what are they usually asking for, and when are they interrupting you? Use a simple log and spend a few days tracking this.

Here are some possible findings and changes you could make.

Make what they need accessible. Whatever they're asking for, make it easier to locate. Organize any forms, supplies, etc., so they're easy to find without your help. Make sure everyone understands where everything is and why.

Create forms, checklists. If the staff continues to interrupt you for the same things, can a form/checklist help? For example, if they constantly need meeting space and everything that goes with it, a meeting request form would streamline the request. You could either put the form on the shared server for easy access, place in a drawer in a common area, or place somewhere near your desk that's clearly labeled.

Carve out time to concentrate. More than two-thirds (41 percent) of the people from the Advanced American Telephones Omnibus survey indicated that they are most productive in the mornings. But for support staff, mornings could be the

most hectic as you're busy getting everyone else's work done. If that's the case, save your thinking work and do it when most people are at lunch (take your meal break during odd hours). If you can, come in before they do, and also pair with a co-worker and cover each other's area when you need to hide and work.

Stop interrupting yourself. You may not realize it, but you could be interrupting yourself all day. Some distractions include:

- **Clutter.** Seeing too much at one time, not knowing what to do first. Put projects away until you're ready to work on them. You'll use external cues such as to do lists, computer reminders, and tickler files to help you remember.
- **Bad email and phone habits.** Checking email and voicemail constantly instead of setting a routine to check regularly.
- **Instant messaging.** Dealing with low-priority messages whose answers can wait.
- **Multitasking.** Jumping around from one thing to the next instead of staying focused until you finish or get to a good stopping point.

Organize Everything, Find Anything

The more organized you are, the quicker you can find what you need. From the clothes closet to your computer files, everything you touch needs to have a system.

A basic principle of organizing is to put like items together, using broad categories with subcategories. For example, the grocery store is organized with departments that include meats, produce, breads, etc. Each department is then subcategorized (e.g., meats are separated as poultry, pork, beef, seafood). Apply this same principle to everything, and you'll be able to find anything the instant you need it.

Add Technology to the Mix

Also according to the survey, 47 percent of support staff indicated that new technology helps them at work, compared to 28 percent of general office workers. Once you've analyzed your work and developed better ways to get it done, look to new technologies, such as the examples below, for help.

You can do more, faster, by using a second monitor, adding a cordless headset, expanding how you use search engines, and taking advantage of macros and templates to handle repetitive work.

Expand Your Workspace and Free Your Hands

You can boost productivity if you double your desktop workspace by adding an additional monitor to your computer. You could stretch a document, such as a

page you're designing, across both monitors, or put something completely different on both. With two monitors, you could:

- Conduct research on the Internet on one and drag the information to the other.
- View your calendar on one (opened in a different window) and check email on the other.
- Read instructions on one and perform the steps on the other.

The Omnibus survey also revealed that 51 percent of people multitask when they're on the phone. You don't want to multitask while you're on the phone if you can't stay focused on the purpose of the call. However, you will face instances where you want or need to keep working. A cordless headset makes it easier to continue working while you're on hold, take copious notes while you're checking voicemail, and get details from a caller as you set up their meeting. It also frees you up to step away from the phone and not miss a call, maximizing productivity away from the desk as well. As a result, be sure to look for a cordless headset with extended range.

Put Search Engines to Work

You're already turning to the Internet when you have a specific Web site to visit, but it can be used for so much more. Here are two ways you can use search engines that you may not have considered.

- **Use for tech support.** Before you call for help or spend hours trying to solve a computer problem, perform a quick search on the error message (put the error message text in quotation marks to look for the exact phrase). You're probably not the first person with the problem, and your answer will most likely show up in a forum that's manned by experts.
- **Find what you need with bits of information.** When you need to find someone, type everything you know about them in the search box.

Save Hours with Templates and Macros

It's common to spend way too much time cutting, pasting, moving, resizing, redesigning, and distributing similar documents to appropriate personnel. If you frequently create documents that contain specialized formatting but not always the same text, you can save hours if you create a template. The template is a shell document with formatting, boilerplate text, headers and footers, macros, and more.

In addition to a template, you can easily turn a tedious, miserable task into the click of a button with a macro. If you use the same set of keystrokes and mouse actions repeatedly, you can record this set of commands (the macro) and play them back as needed.

You don't have seconds to spare throughout the day and the more efficient you are, the more effective you'll become. You'll start to spend less time working but

get more done. You might have to give up a couple of weekends to put all this in place, but unlike dieting or exercising, the results are immediate.

*Peggy Duncan is a personal productivity expert, author of *The Time Management Memory Jogger™*, and spokesperson for AT&T's line of business telephony products, including the AT&T Cordless Headset, from Advanced American Telephones. For free computer tips and tricks that will save you hours a day, visit www.PeggyDuncan.com.*