

Taming the "monkey mind": How to deal with interruptions in your nonprofit job

Written by: Susan Fish

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A long time ago, Buddha described the human mind as being like a monkey grabbing one branch only to let it go to seize another branch. This so-called “monkey mind” is often encouraged by our surroundings, particularly in the nonprofit sector where clients, staff, customers, funders and others all vie for our attention and limited resources.

Gloria Mark, professor in the Department of Informatics at the University of California, who studies what's called “interruption science”, conducted a study of office workers in which she found that each employee “spent only 11 minutes on any given project before being interrupted”, and worse, that “each time a worker was distracted from a task, it would take, on average, 25 minutes to return to that task.”

Sound familiar?

CharityVillage wanted to take a closer look at what interruptions look like in the nonprofit sector, and how we can realistically work with the competing claims on our attention.

What do interruptions look like?

According to interruption science researchers, an interruption is “the suspension of one stream of work prior to completion, with the intent of returning to and completing the original stream of work.” Because nonprofits tend to be smaller organizations, says time management expert Mark Ellwood, a number of interruptions occur because more and broader tasks need to be dealt with by fewer people. “An executive director is not only managing programs but may also be responsible for volunteers and a building. When the roof is suddenly leaking, an ED may have to put their planned work aside.”

Depending on the nature of our organization and our role within it, interruptions may look very different: for **Ruth Vermeulen**, manager, Mennonite Central Committee Thrift Shop in Lethbridge, AB, it can look like the 200-300 customers who come into her thrift store each day, or the 125 volunteers who work there. She says, “In a place like this, it is all about interruptions. I couldn't track all the things we do in a day.” For a receptionist, it can be someone walking in the door or calling on the phone. For an ED, it can be dealing with someone handing in their resignation or that aforementioned leaky roof. If we work in a shared office space,

we are interrupted by someone coughing, getting up from their chair or having a conversation. For all of us, it can be the ding of our phones or computers, asking for our attention, pulling us away from our task.

When we think of our work that gets interrupted, we tend to think of what author and Georgetown University professor Cal Newport calls “deep work”: the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. This could be setting a budget, writing a grant proposal, finishing payroll, writing a newsletter, etc.

Are our interruptions our work?

Theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote: “I have always been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted; then I realized that the interruptions were my work.”

Ellwood says we need to think carefully about what we classify as interruptions. He says, “People talk about interruptions as interruptive, but most of us work collaboratively and that happens through person-to-person contact. Some are organized while the ones we call interruptions tend to be more ad hoc, but we need to recognize that organizations thrive through synergy and positive interactions.”

Further, Gloria Mark says, “...our jobs today are ‘interrupt driven.’ Distractions are not just a plague on our work - sometimes they are our work. To be cut off from other workers is to be cut off from everything.”

Vermeulen says that sometimes it comes down to how we approach an interruption. “You have a choice about whether you see things as an interruption or an opportunity. How we view such interactions affects how we deal with them. I could be busy all day and not connect with people but instead I try to deal with interruptions as kindly as possible and to make them into opportunities.”

Maryna Prystaiko, operation manager of Winnipeg furniture bank Hands of Hope, says, “Interruptions disturb my work but I understand this is part of my work and that acceptance makes it easier.”

The problem is that studies find that interruptions “in almost all instances, are disruptive to performance and induce errors.” While our work environments are generally lower risk than, say, an airport control tower or operating room, there are consequences to interruptions in the form of stress and poorer performance.

Linda Stone, software executive, says that we operate out of “continuous partial attention: we are so busy keeping tabs on everything that we never focus on anything.” As Ellwood pointed out earlier, Stone says, “The reason many interruptions seem impossible to ignore is that they are about relationships - someone, or something, is calling out to us. It is why we have such complex emotions about the chaos of the modern office, feeling alternately drained by its demands and exhilarated when we successfully surf the flood.” But, she cautions, “What happens when you take that to the extreme? You get overconnected.”

One nonprofit staffer puts the question like this: “How do you stay open and approachable without inviting constant interruptions?” Carol Reist, executive director of Mississauga ON drop-in centre The Dam, says, “For so many people working in nonprofit, especially those working in a service capacity, it is nearly impossible to

schedule focused time. It's just not part of the job. Suggestions like blocking off times of your day can be really unrealistic.”

When we welcome interruptions

Viewing interruptions as opportunities is easier for some people than others. Sometimes this is simply a question of personality. Prystaiko says, “Personality has a huge impact on work: some people need to finish one task before they take on another and they can’t be flexible.” By contrast, Reist says, “The ability to be interrupted is an asset to an ED. For me, being interrupted gives time for my head to catch up with what I was working on. I actually find it’s more effective for me to work in short bursts.” Reist adds that it is important to know your own personality and preferred working and communication style. It’s also helpful to know your organization, Reist says. “Someone who needs a structured environment would probably be frustrated by our collaborative, consensus-building approach.”

It can also have to do with our needs. Leadership coach Kathy Archer notes, “Many of us in the nonprofit sector are nurturers who want to be needed, to be heroes, to fix things. When we are interrupted, we have an urge to jump in and fix everything.” Reist adds, “We can get energy from always being needed, interrupted, involved with everything.”

Beyond this, we may welcome interruptions as a good way to procrastinate. When we find ourselves looking for distractions or welcoming interruptions as excuses to avoid our work, Archer suggests exploring what’s behind this. “What am I procrastinating on? How is procrastination benefitting me? What’s going on?” She observes that often we are afraid about a very specific part of a task, such as a tricky part of a performance appraisal. Archer advises clients to be aware of what’s behind procrastination and to reward themselves for staying on task. At other times, we may need to cultivate interruptions as ways of refreshing our minds and bodies to better engage in our work.

When interruptions really bother us

There are times when interruptions are particularly disruptive. Reist says, “Ideally we try to work on tasks that are important before they become urgent, when we can give them the time they deserve. But when an important task becomes urgent, and we get interrupted, we don’t have the time to get refocused on our important task. The more we can stay out of urgency, the less interruptions bother us.”

For Reist, this is part of a bigger question about well-being. “When we are in an emotionally healthy place, interruptions aren’t as big a deal. But when we’re stressed out, interruptions become more anxiety-producing because we lack capacity due to whatever is taking up emotional space.” While there are seasons within organizations — such as year-end — with natural stressors, it’s easy for us to equate doing a good job with being stressed out. Reist says, “Most interruptions are about the immediate stuff that requires quick answers or decisions, but if we’re stressed out, we don’t have time to answer well. We need to give ourselves time and space to think about the big picture so we can be available for those interruptions and triage what’s going on.”

Triaging Interruptions: Ten Techniques

While, as Reist says, many time management suggestions aren't always realistic for those working in the nonprofit sector, here are ten triage techniques people do find useful.

1. Take responsibility for yourself. "I always thought interruptions were everyone else's fault until I worked at home," says Archer. "I've learned that you can blame others but you are the one who has to take responsibility for keeping yourself on task."

2. Manage the interruption rather than letting it manage you. Ellwood describes his approach to managing interruptions when working on a high priority activity. "First, I explain that I'm busy on an important task and ask if we can meet in an hour. If the person says it's urgent, I ask them what it is about. If the problem is too urgent to wait, I often give them five minutes at the time and then arrange to meet with them when my task is finished." Ellwood describes this approach as both collaborative and one that manages the interruption on your own terms.

3. Train your brain. Mindfulness techniques can be useful in training your mind not to be distracted, says Archer, as well as to be able to refocus more quickly on the original task.

4. Set priorities. Vermeulen says, "Prioritize the things you absolutely need to deal with in a day — such as payroll. Beyond that, I try to let things go. If it can wait until tomorrow, I don't sweat it."

5. Use tools. Many people use a wide variety of tools as visual cues to others or ways of blocking out distractions when work is less conducive to interruptions. These can include noise-canceling headphones, schedules, timers, traffic light signals, do not disturb signs, etc. Eliminating tools — such as turning off notifications on cell phones or putting phones aside — can also minimize interruptions.

6. Get some data. Ellwood recommends tracking interruptions to understand where they are coming from so that you can manage them better.

7. Create (and use) policies, procedures and systems. When Prystaiko started working at Hands of Hope, clients would call at all hours, looking for furniture and household goods. She instituted set times for clients to call, and included one day a week when only emergency calls are accepted. She also created a process for other agencies to contact Hands of Hope. "It took some time for our clients to adjust to our system, but it allowed us to become more productive and to still be responsive." Ellwood notes that organizations can develop complaint policies or FAQ brochures and other tools that address common interruptions with less disruption.

8. Delegate. While recognizing that it's often easier and more satisfying to do a task ourselves, Ellwood observes that delegating a task can eliminate interruptions for one person while rewarding another staff with more responsibility. Reist asks: Is this really my job or is it someone else's?

9. Talk to your team. Organizations can work far more effectively if they have conversations about how, when and how often communication happens. If an employee frequently interrupts with questions, Ellwood suggests asking them to save questions to meet weekly or daily. Archer suggests deciding as a team when it is appropriate to pop a head in the door, and what calls for an email, a text or a phone call. She also says, “We complain we are running ragged because everyone needs us, but have we taught them to make decisions, given them a process within the organization for filtering requests and things that pop up?”

10. Set aside time for deep work. Vermeulen finds time at the end of the day after other staff and volunteers have left to be productive time for quiet concentration. Other people come in early, explain they will be closing their door for a certain amount of time, or work from home. Archer suggests that it is also vital for teams to set times for deep work when engaged in collaborative work or meetings that benefit from focus, such as a performance appraisal.

“Interruptions are expected and part of life, and we need to learn to manage them,” says Archer. Even if our days are not unlike monkeys swinging from branch to branch, we can learn to be conscious of the interruptions and how we choose to prepare for and respond to them.

Susan Fish is a writer/editor at Storywell, a company that helps individuals and organizations tell their story well. She has written for the nonprofit sector for almost two decades and loves a good story.