



Time Management: Dealing with Time Bandits

A study by researchers at the University of California in 2005 found that office staff can only work for an average of 11 minutes before getting interrupted. You can think of interruptions as *Time Bandits*. They storm into your peaceful town, just when you're minding your own business, and make off with sack fulls of your precious time. In this article we outline two ways of dealing with time bandits: *reframing* and *resisting*.

A study by researchers at the University of California in 2005 found that office staff can only work for an average of 11 minutes before getting interrupted. When we share that statistic with colleagues in the UK, the most common reaction is "As long as that?!" The constant demand to get 'champagne results with beer resources' is one thing. But to take on that challenge whilst having to bat away all the interruptions that come our way is quite another!

You can think of interruptions as *Time Bandits*. They storm into your peaceful town, just when you're minding your own business, and make off with sack fulls of your precious time. They come in many guises: colleagues, emails, phone calls, memos – the list goes on. They leave you cursing your luck, your computer, your colleagues and just about everything else. "Just leave me alone!"

We find it helpful to think about dealing with these bandits in two ways: *reframing* and *resisting*.

Reframing

Reframing is all about taking a different attitude to interruptions. By thinking of them as irritating barriers standing between us and progress, we run the risk of adopting a really unhelpful mindset. Make the Bandits your friends by remembering these key points:

It's your job!

For most of us, interruptions are an important part of our role whether we like it or not. When staff interrupt managers, it allows issues to be shared and resolved, which means removing barriers for those staff. That's a good thing. When a corporate partner calls to check on something, it allows fundraising staff to nurture that partner, paving the way for a more fruitful relationship. That's a good thing, too. And when someone calls the IT help desk...well, you kind of expect them to be OK about interruptions...

Interruptions are interactions between people, and often people trying to work together towards a common goal. Don't be too quick to knock them!

It's not just 'them'...

We all tend to think Time Bandits are other people, other things. In fact, we can be our own worst Time Bandits. How easy is it to use events around us as an excuse to distract ourselves from a challenging or uninteresting task? A colleague walks past your desk, and you get into a conversation about a conference it might be worth attending. You curse this Time Bandit as you return to your work, studiously ignoring the fact that it was you who started the chat. Or maybe they did interrupt, but how eager were you to be diverted from finishing the quarterly report...

So interruptions aren't always things that happen *to* us – they're often activities *we choose to engage in*. And that brings us to our next point.

It's all about control

Positive psychology examines what makes people healthy and productive. One of the key factors influencing things like well-being and productivity is our sense of 'locus of control'. The more that we feel we have control over our lives and events in our lives, the happier and more effective we're likely to be. Ineffective and unhappy people tend to place the locus of control outside themselves – "It's their fault". If we think of ourselves as a victim, buffeted by a sea of work and constantly rained on by interruptions, we're more likely to get stressed and be less effective.

Realising that we do have control has two implications for us when dealing with interruptions. Firstly, it enables us to consider saying 'no' – more of that below. But it also means that, if we allow the interruption, we can influence how long it continues. If a call is about an accounts enquiry, fine, but you can choose whether or not you go on to talk about other issues, last night's TV or whatever. Stay in control and make sure that an interruption doesn't turn into a complete distraction.

Resisting

Reframing is one thing, but we also need to be able to *resist* interruptions, to head off those Bandits at the pass. Many people find it useful to remove themselves from the open workplace from time to time, whether by moving into another room, wearing headphones or working from home. But most of us can't do that much of the time, precisely because we need to interact with others. And that means we're constantly at risk of a Bandit raid.

Resisting Bandits in the form of colleagues asking for help is something many of us find hard. After all, we work in this sector largely because we want to help people – and saying "no" goes directly against that ethos. Doesn't it?

Well, no. Let's show you how.

The considered no

If someone asks you for help, you might consider saying: "Let me have a think about it. If I can help, I'll get back to you later."

You run the risk of being interrupted again later, of course, but in the meantime two things happen: You give yourself space to think if you really are the best person to help – or prepare another 'no' Unlikely to be satisfied with waiting, the Bandit will probably go and raid another person (and not come back). They may even find they can solve the problem themselves.

The conditional no

We live in an interdependent world, so take advantage of that. In response to a request, you might say: "Yes, I'd be happy to do that for you. In return, could you take a look at this for me?"

In effect, you're saying "Yes" but – depending on what kind of deal you strike – there's the opportunity for you to end up time-richer. You've out-bandited the Bandit!

The deflected no

In some cases, the only decent thing to do is to send the Bandit off in another direction. "I'd love to help, but the person you really need to speak to is Yvonne..."

It might sound sneaky, but giving yourself a moment to reflect on whether you are best placed to help

can be genuinely constructive for all concerned. An early declaration of incompetence (saying 'no') is so much more helpful than one made having wasted everyone's time by instantly saying 'yes'.

The 'completed staff work' no

A concept invented by Napoleon whereby he asked his generals only to bring solutions to him, not problems. Bringing the concept up to date, we can ask our staff only to interrupt us if they have done as much as they possibly can on the piece of work in question. And whenever they do interrupt us, we can ensure that we don't unthinkingly take the problem off their hands. Take a coaching approach, and make it clear that you'll offer all the direction and support they need, *but not more*.

The priority no

Whenever we say 'yes' to something, we are saying 'no' to a load of other things, because time is a limited resource. Ultimately, it's far easier to say 'no', therefore, when we know that we are saying 'yes' to something more important. "I'd really like to help you with that campaign document, but I think that finalising this press release should take priority. What do you think?"

Managing our time comes down to knowing what's important and doing what's important. If your thing is more important than mine, I have a duty to help you with yours. If my thing is more important than yours, I have a duty to work on mine. And if it's not clear, I need to come to some agreement, taking the organisation's needs into account. That's not easy, but it *is* that simple...

Further help

If you want to find out more about managing your time you might be interested in our 1-day programme **Managing Multiple Priorities**. It will introduce you to a whole raft of tools to help you successfully manage your time and workload.

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