

## How to Interrupt Someone's Workday – Without Annoying Them



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Summary. Interruptions are a fact of life – but do they have to be unpleasant? A recent study found that 31% of workplace interruptions are actually experienced positively, and offers six strategies to help anyone become a better (that is, less annoying) interrupter: Assess...

Getting interrupted at work can be incredibly frustrating, annoying, and stressful – but does it have to be? Workplace interruptions are [often necessary](#), providing us with the information and real-time collaboration we need to do our jobs. And as Slack, Zoom, and countless other communication tools make it ever easier to get in touch, these interruptions are only becoming [more frequent](#) (and unavoidable).

The good news is, [recent research](#) suggests that interruptions don't have to be unpleasant. I conducted a study with fellow management researcher David Greenway in which we asked 35 full-time, in-person knowledge workers to track every time they were interrupted throughout their workday (all data was collected before the

pandemic). Through an analysis of their logs and a series of in-depth interviews, we found that positively-perceived interruptions were in fact almost as common as negative ones: Of the 251 interruptions reported by our participants, 31% were experienced positively, while 34% were negative and 35% were neutral. We also found that 80% of our participants reported at least one positive interruption over the course of their workday, while 86% recorded at least one negative interruption.

Why would someone feel good about getting interrupted? In our study, participants who reported positive interruptions described how these experiences sparked emotions such as happiness, excitement, or satisfaction. For example, an HR specialist explained how even though she was in the middle of working on a project plan, she was glad when a colleague interrupted her to ask her to review some marketing materials:

*"This was a welcome interruption because it related to another project I [was] hoping to wrap up soon...Even though it interrupted my work on the project plan...I saw it as positive. I was glad that [the marketing project] was moving along...It was more important to do that in that moment than to finish the project plan, which was not [as] urgent."*

Similarly, a stock trader described being pleased when her new hire stopped by her desk before the market opened for the day, even though she had been in the middle of checking the news:

*"We don't take kindly to interruptions during the trading hours, [but] before the market opens is a great time to [check in]...He told me what he had done the previous day, what he had gone through, and asked, 'What should we work on today?'...I was pretty excited...I don't get a lot of chances to hire someone under me [and] this is the first person that I went to bat for and said we should hire. So it made me feel good that he's doing so well...Getting him up to speed will help in the long run...[That] made it a positive experience."*

Clearly, how we experience an interruption can vary substantially depending on how it affects our work. While switching gears and shuffling our schedules around to accommodate an unexpected task can be frustrating, interruptions can feel positive if they seem like a good use of our time. Does this interruption help me make progress on something worthwhile? Is this new task more important than whatever I was doing before? We are also more likely to experience interruptions positively if they fit more easily into our day. Is this a convenient moment to deal with this interruption? Do I have enough spare time to add it to my workload? Did I already mentally plan to spend time on this task?

Considering these factors can help you optimize how, when, and whom you interrupt. We've identified several specific strategies that can help you increase the chances that your interruption will be received positively:

## **1. Assess how critical the task is.**

People are more likely to see an interruption as worth their time if the task they're being asked to do seems important — especially if it seems *more* important than whatever they were working on previously. So, before interrupting someone, consider whether what you want them to do is likely to be a priority for them.

## **2. Don't pile on.**

Similarly, we found that people tend to react negatively to an interruption if it pops up at a time when they were already feeling overloaded. To avoid piling on, ask yourself what you know about the person's current workload. If you know they are slammed, consider interrupting someone else instead (if the task is urgent) or waiting until the person has less on their plate (if the task can wait).

## **3. Identify the right person to interrupt.**

It's always annoying when you're interrupted by someone, only to discover that you're not even the right person for the job. For instance, an office assistant in our study reacted negatively when someone asked her to look for packing supplies, since that was a task she felt could easily have been done by the interrupter himself. So before you knock on someone's door, ask yourself: Is this the right person to take on this new task? Whose role makes them the best fit for the task you need help with? Whose responsibilities typically include similar tasks? Your interruption is much more likely to be well-received if you put in the work up front to determine the best person to ask.

#### **4. Pay attention to busyness cues.**

Building on prior [laboratory experiments](#), our study found that interruptions are experienced more positively if they occur at what feels like the "right" time. That typically means waiting for a moment when the person you want to interrupt isn't deeply engrossed in another task, or when they need a break from their regular work anyway. To determine whether it's a good time to interrupt, pay attention to the signals the person is sending: Are they working with their door closed or open? Are they listed as "away" or "available" online? Do they have this hour blocked off on their calendar? These cues can clue you into how an interruption is likely to be experienced.

#### **5. Decrease the time burden.**

In our study, we found that people's perceptions about how long an interruption seemed to last influenced how they felt about it. When interruptions seemed to drag on or take longer than they "should have," they were more likely to cause negative feelings. To address this, think creatively about how you can lighten the load and use the person's time most efficiently. Can you present the context for the interruption more succinctly? Are there steps you could complete yourself before handing the task over to someone else? Importantly, it's all about how you're perceived — even if these details don't feel

like a big deal to you, presenting the interruption in a manner that highlights your respect for the other person's time can have a major impact on how they react.

## **6. Give advance warning.**

Interruptions, by definition, will always be somewhat unexpected. But they don't have to come entirely out of the blue – in some cases, you can let someone know that you expect to have to interrupt them in the near future. For instance, if you plan to ask a coworker for feedback on a website design once you finish it, you can let them know that you'll be in touch within the next week. This helps your colleague mentally plan for the interruption and make time for the task, even if the exact timing is still unknown.

Especially as many organizations shift to long-term hybrid models, it's more important than ever to think proactively about how we communicate with one another at work. The return to the office, whether part-time or full-time, will bring back opportunities for in-person interruptions that were impossible when all communication was conducted online. At the same time, a greater reliance on instant messaging, video calls, and other digital tools creates its own challenges, as many barriers to interruptions (as well as the visible cues that help to determine whether an interruption is appropriate) are substantially reduced. Of course, there have always been better and worse ways to interrupt someone – but in this complex new landscape, it's up to all of us to pay close attention to evolving norms about what it means to be a "good" interrupter.