

Heading back to the office? Not all workplace interruptions are bad for business

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If you're heading back to the office after working from home, you may re-encounter interruptions you've not experienced for 18 months: The family pet is replaced by chatty coworkers who stop at your desk to say

hi.

A new study from the Kelley School of Business shows those interruptions can be good—if the conversations are related to work.

The research, published in the *Journal of Management*, argues against popular belief that workplace interruptions are bad for business. By surveying the experiences of hundreds of workers and their co-workers, researchers found that if intrusions are "in-role," or have something to do with work that is of significance, they can actually increase [work engagement](#), collaboration and, ultimately, the degree to which employees are willing to help the organization and each other.

Likewise, they found that "non-role intrusions," or interruptions involving a coworker who stops to chat or socialize about non-work-related topics, are detrimental. Intruded-upon employees are less engaged in their work and ultimately less helpful to the organization.

"Our research showed in-role intrusions boost important and desirable behaviors of employees," said Ryan Outlaw, assistant professor of management at the IU Kelley School of Business at IUPUI. "This is important for managers to consider when looking at post-pandemic work arrangements. Creating or renewing expectations when it comes to workplace interruptions (e.g., 'my door is open for discussions on projects and new ideas, but let's save sports conversation for a break time') will be beneficial, especially as employees head back to the office."

Researchers say establishing norms around workplace interruptions—especially when working in the office after being home—will also help ensure the benefits of "in-role" intrusions aren't undermined if they occur too frequently or not enough.

Other co-authors include John Bush of the University of Missouri, Michael Baer and David Welsh of Arizona State University, Niharika Garud of the University of Melbourne and Hudson Sessions of the University of Oregon.

More information: John T. Bush et al, To What Do I Owe This Visit? The Drawbacks and Benefits of In-Role and Non-Role Intrusions, *Journal of Management* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/01492063211015288](https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211015288)

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