What organizations get wrong about interruptions at work

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It comes as no surprise that being interrupted at work by other people can have negative effects, like lowered productivity. But a study shows an upside to these interruptions at work: increased feelings of belonging.

Researchers led by Harshad Puranik at the University of Illinois Chicago looked at this common workplace phenomenon from two aspects.

First, interruptions get in the way of completing work tasks and require employees to repeatedly switch attention between tasks. That's where the negative effects of interruptions happen. However, beyond the task-based aspect, the group found that being interrupted by others has a social component to it—social interaction with the interrupter that can have a positive effect on the interrupted employees.

"Our results revealed that the social interaction occurring during work interruptions can carry beneficial effects for interrupted employees," said Puranik, UIC assistant professor of managerial studies in the College of Business Administration. "If the past year of social distancing and isolation has shown us anything, it is that humans are social beings who have an inherent need for interacting with others."

Building on prior research on work interruptions, the researchers surveyed 111 full-time employees twice a day—once at lunch and once at the end of their workday—for three weeks.

While there were downsides to interruptions at work, like raising levels of stress and lowering people's energy, there was an upside, the researchers found. Employees felt more like they belonged, and that eventually led to higher job satisfaction.

The study found something else on top of this. The social aspect of work interruptions also weakened the negative impact that the switching of tasks during interruptions had on employees' job satisfaction.

This means that, instead of the negative experience they are often made out to be, being interrupted at work can be a "net positive for the well-being of employees," according to Puranik.

Therefore, the researchers urge managers to better manage rather than completely eliminate work interruptions.

One way to do this is by giving employees more autonomy in how they manage work and handle work interruptions, such as allowing employees more leeway in choosing when and where they work from and how they schedule their work. This can help boost the positive effects of interruptions' social side. Another option is to put into practice interventions that reduce other unnecessary workplace demands that drain employees' energy, like redesigning workplaces to remove unwanted background noises, so that employees have...
enough energy to deal with the negative task-related effects of work interruptions.

The authors concluded that further research is needed on whether factors such as daily workload, employees' occupation and the nature of interruptions (e.g. virtual vs. in-person) could shape reactions to workplace interruptions.

The study is scheduled to be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.


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