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Distracted
FEATURES

health

Too many meetings. Too much technology. Too few office walls. We've never been more distracted at work. And it's costing us millions

The mid-July heat is already oppressive by 10 a.m. on Bay Street in Toronto, as two men hunched over smartphones collide on the steps of an office tower. Only one reacts to the jostle-both walk away with their eyes still glued to their devices. Down the street in a chilly coffee shop, three female colleagues discuss ideas for a sales campaign; one speaks, the others message friends on Facebook and Twitter. A customer brushes in and asks aloud for the time. No one answers him and with a roll of his eyes he stoops to fish his own cell out of a backpack.

These hopelessly distracted people are walking, typing clichés of the modern business person: distracted in meetings, distracted online, distracted while walking around. Technological advancements and tools from e-mail to Twitter and Facebook to instant messages compete for our time in the office.

But while bleating smartphones and constantly chirping social media usually take the blame for derailing productivity, there is a second, perhaps even more insidious, low-tech impediment to actually getting work done: good old-fashioned meetings. In the 1970s, meetings increasingly became a way to engender teamwork, collaboration and a sense of democracy in the workplace. As office hierarchies became increasingly flattened and team-building exercises became the norm, managers increasingly felt compelled to call gatherings to discuss even the smallest of decisions. And when employees aren't huddled in the boardroom, open concept offices and low-walled cubicles

encourage co-workers to drop by and interrupt. It's rare that even top managers have office doors anymore; the egalitarian ethos of the early Internet boom-where companies were more likely to equip their offices with foosball tables than boardroom tables-irrevocably changed corporate culture. "By shifting to a more collaborative work environment, the knowledge industry has opened a veritable Pandora's box, full of countless interruptions, distractions and other evils," wrote Jonathan B. Spira, an analyst with Basex, a New York-based research firm. "Whereas ten years ago, work was more a solitary pursuit, now workers are dependant on communication with each other. One result is an increase in the sheer quantity of interruptions they face."

In his research, Spira estimated that $650 billion was lost in the United States each year to unnecessary interruptions. Worse, he found that the impact of interruptions was increasing by 5% each year. If left unchecked, this leads to the somewhat comical realization that the average worker's day will be entirely occupied by interruptions by 2031. "Businesses need to recognize that just because you're giving somebody an office, doesn't mean you're giving them a place to work. It just means that they have somewhere to sit," says Jason Fried, the founder of 37Signals, a web-based apps company, and a critic of the prevailing workplace culture. "If the office is a distraction, with too many people walking around, bothering people, and too many managers asking questions all the time, and too many meetings, then the office is detrimental. In fact, it's hurting productivity."

Even our interruptions have interruptions, as office workers play with their iPhones and BlackBerrys during the very meetings that distract them from their actual work. Together, machines and meetings have created a massively ineffective, interrupted and disturbed workforce that is wasting billions of dollars each year. Even people who believe themselves to be multi-tasking magicians just aren't able to cope with the regular interruptions. The average person is distracted at work between six and 11 times each hour. Unfortunately, it can take upwards of 25 minutes to regain total focus on the job, according to experts. In 50% of cases, people don't return to the task at all. All the time spent running circles makes employees feel busier than ever. But really, these distractions are our undoing.

THIS PAST JANUARY, Fried declared Boycott a Meeting Day. He wanted to poke fun at the real enemies of productivity, which he labels M&Ms: Meetings and Managers. Fried isn't an anti-social hermit-37Signals actually specializes in web-based software that facilitates collaboration. But meetings don't facilitate meaningful or productive interaction, he says. "It's easy to think when people are talking to each other they're collaborating, but collaborating is thinking about something deeply and pitching ideas back and forth," says Fried. "Unless the result of the meeting is truly achieving something, some new idea, then it is just an interruption. Democratic collaboration can be a good thing. But just pulling people together in a room is often less important than what they were doing on their own. It's an excuse."

Workers united behind Fried's boycott. Over 200,000 people signed up to participate, and enthusiasts voiced their approval in multiple languages. "Every minute you avoid spending in a meeting is a minute you can get real work done instead!" one participant tweeted.

Fried first noticed the issue of workplace interruptions while he was working as a freelance web designer. "I would go into the offices of clients of mine and talked to friends about it and they said, 'Man, I have to work at night, or on weekends-I can't get my work done," he says. Since Fried didn't

believe that workloads were actually increasing, he turned his focus to the distractions that were bothering his friends. "If you can't get as much done at the office, then you have to carve out some of your own personal time. That tends to be on the weekends, or late at night. I think it's so unnecessary and needs to stop."

"Too many meetings" may seem the lament of an office drone frequently frog-marched into boardrooms by uncaring corporate overlords. But bosses don't like meetings, either. Ken Hudson has a question he likes to ask corporate managers: What's the least productive part of your day? "They'd always say meetings," says Hudson, a business consultant and former university lecturer in Australia. "When I asked them to tell me more about meetings, they'd get emotional and say there are too many, they're too long, there are too many people there, they're boring, they're draining and they're not productive." These answers fascinated Hudson, and he began to study the executives' time commitments. He found they spent anywhere from 70% to 90% of their time in meetings, but "when I asked what they were doing about making meetings better, almost all of the leaders of large corporations that I talked to just sort of shrugged their shoulders with a resigned air of defeat."

And that indifference toward changing a broken system is a big problem. Hudson's own research and observations are backed by similar work done by the University of North Carolina, which found that the most powerful factor in job satisfaction was how the employee felt about the effectiveness of the meetings he or she attends. Three different studies showed that staffers who consistently attend frustrating meetings are more stressed and dissatisfied with their jobs than their counterparts. They're also more likely to leave their jobs. "This is much worse that it's ever been, both in terms of the number of meetings and the amount of time people spend in them," says Hudson. And unfortunately, "The expectation is for the future that this problem will only get worse. There's no sense that this will go away."

Hudson thinks meetings are often driven by big egos and laziness. "My intuition, and I haven't been able to prove this, but part of the reason why leaders and managers don't want to improve meetings is because of emotional factors, like going to meetings says, 'Look at me and look how important I am.'" Being caught up in meetings makes employees feel like the company or team couldn't go without them. "It's like counting your friends on Facebook to judge your popularity," he says. "They complain and say that if they didn't go to all these meetings, they could be so productive, but I think they kind of hide behind that claim."

THE SHEER VOLUME of meetings is a problem, but employee behaviour during the frequent powwows only compound the distractions. David Starkey, who works in production planning and inventory control at a manufacturing company in Ajax, Ont., sits through upwards of four meetings each day, of which he says half are productive and necessary. Over the past few years, Starkey has noticed a change in the way people approach meetings, and it has convinced him that the structure and formality that used to make meetings efficient is long gone. The meetings are frustrating, but the gadgets are making them worse. "I remember meetings years ago where you listened to what people had to say, you respected it, and you took notes. Now, it's hey, ping my BlackBerry is going off, and people are having online chat discussions," he says. "People need to learn to shut off their tools." This phenomenon was dubbed "continuous partial attention" by Linda Stone, a Seattle-based writer

and speaker. "The motivation is 'I don't want to miss anything because being connected makes me feel important,'" she once said. Starkey has a BlackBerry himself and is an avid Facebooker, but he thinks that there is a definite lack of etiquette in society when it comes to the appropriate use of a smartphone-both at work and everywhere else. "I went to a movie with my wife last week, and I eventually had to ask a women beside me to shut off her device. I wish we could do that in a meeting, but when your boss is there, and it's his phone going, it's aggravating and makes it hard to focus." Recently, when his interoffice alert popped up to signal a meeting, Starkey decided to dismiss the notice and skip the gathering altogether. He was pleased to find that once he explained that avoiding the session was the only way he could finish his work before a plant shutdown, his boss agreed with his decision. "As long as you can explain what you can accomplish when you're not at that meeting, they understand it," he says.

Unlike Starkey, many people simply accept interruptions as a part of their work life. Indeed, 94.5% of workers think it's acceptable for their bosses to barge in with an urgent matter, and 90% think that interruptions from subordinates are equally understandable, according to Basex's Spira. More surprisingly, 62% felt it was all right to be bothered at work by a friend with a personal question. We've come to accept distractions, as the number of ways we can be distracted by friends or co-workers have proliferated. Two decades ago, "One could close the door, not answer the phone and that would be it," Spira writes. Today, he says our multiple phones, social media networks and e-mail make it far harder for us to remain "unmolested."

Our lives now interrupt work, and work distracts us from our lives. Sarah Thompson, account director of social-media analytics at Networked Insights, once felt proud to be reachable on her BlackBerry at any moment of the day or night. But she soon realized that the rewards for this commitment were slim, and felt her values had been misplaced. "Companies will take as much as they can. They don't always understand what is urgent, and what to prioritize," she says. "I mean, my niece and nephew have a want and need at every moment. It doesn't mean you give in to that demand." These days, when she's hanging out with her niece and nephew playing Mario Kart, she makes sure she's "focused on having fun with them, and not worried about something vibrating in my pocket."

SOME EMPLOYEES who are fed up with being interrupted by supposedly productivity-boosting technology are oddly hoping using even more technology will grant them self control. Popular blog Lifehacker offers tip> on how to do daily tasks more quickly and efficiently. A computer program called AntiSocial disables user-specified social sites for a chosen period of time. The Firefox program LeechBlock does the same thing and calls itself a "productivity tool."

But of course, nothing is foolproof. AntiSocial, for example, can be thwarted by a quick computer reboot. When it comes to distracting technology, the only real answer is discipline. "If you want to lose weight, it comes down to discipline. There are plenty of diets and plenty of people telling you what to do, but you have to make the choice yourself. The same is true for work. If you want to be bothered and interrupted by all these other things you can do to yourself, and check online and whatever, it's going to happen," says Fried.

The first step toward developing discipline is admitting that the devices that masquerade as business tools can be addictive, a crutch and need to be used with caution just like meetings. Some experts

suggest organizations record all the hours that each employee spends in meetings, and multiply it by how much the employee earns per hour to paint an accurate picture of the cost of so many daily meet-ups. If employers truly do want to change their company culture, ideas like limiting meeting size to reduce distraction and tangents can be helpful. Other suggestions like declaring one day of the week a meeting-free day offers staff uninterrupted time where others can count on them to be available.

But there are few tips that an individual can employ to avoid human contact except to be brief when speaking to an interrupting colleague and wear headphones when possible. (Studies show this will dissuade people from striking up a conversation). Fried says the 37signal's office is as quiet as a library. There's no talking, and queries come in by e-mail or instant message. That gives the recipient more control, because while they can choose to check their inbox, they can't really choose to ignore someone walking over to talk to them by their cubicle or calling them on the phone.

"I think if people started thinking about interruption as being really arrogant, they would interrupt each other less," says Fried. When they recognize that when you interrupt somebody, you're basically saying Whatever I have to tell you is more important than what you're doing,' and that's a very arrogant thing to do, I think people would step back."

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By JACQUELINE NELSON

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