

Title: Interruptions in the office: An observational field study

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Abstract:

Disruptive interruptions are a constant nuisance in the workplace and can lead to errors. While simply annoying in most occupations, such disruptions can be more costly in safety critical environments such as aviation and military settings. Much research in laboratory settings has been done trying to understand why and how interruptions are disruptive. One area that has not received as much attention, however, is how interruptions in a naturalistic setting, such as an office, actually interfere with people's ability to perform their jobs.

A naturalistic observational study was conducted in which four George Mason University employees were videotaped performing their jobs in multiple one hour sessions. In this study interruptions were defined as any external event (such as a phone call or knock on the door) that required the participant to divert his or her attention from the task he or she had been working on in order to attend to the interrupting task. For each interruption, the type of primary task, length of time on that task, length of the interruption, whether there was an environment change during the interruption (i.e., interrupting task necessitates a new program being opened), and the time following an interruption it took for the participant to resume the primary task were recorded. It was found that participants took longer to resume the primary task when interruptions were longer and when the environment changed. Further research in this area will allow the workplace to be better adapted to support accurate and safe task completion.