

One Answer To Distractions

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My previous commentary was titled, "The Age of Distraction." As you may recall, that was the subtitle to a book in which the author postulated that there has never been a time in mankind's history in which valuable accomplishment is so hindered by the easy reach one has to divert his attention. Distractions are so easily available, it seems as though they are almost begging to be paid attention to.

About a week later, an article appeared in my inbox by one Dave Crenshaw. I've never heard of him before, but what he wrote about did intrigue me. He titles himself as an author, speaker, and—listen to this—"a business chaos crusher." He crushes chaos in businesses. We know these people better under the general title, "efficiency experts." Mr. Crenshaw is an expert on maintaining focus—teaching people how to maintain focus. He has his a job, as a business employee, dealing with distractions, because—as you're going to hear in just a few minutes—distractions are a *very* major cost of operating a business at a profit.

Here was the question: On average, how many times per workday would you say you are being interrupted? He answered his question with this response:

While everyone's mileage may vary, years of field experience working with executives and managers for companies of varying sizes and industries has shown me that the average person [a person involved in business] is either interrupted by or interrupts himself mentally at least fifteen times per hour—or more.

He states, "To answer the interruption or not to answer the interruption, that's the real question." He's saying they are going to come.

Let me multiply these figures out for you. Fifteen times per hour is 120 times in an eight hour day; 4,800 times a week...times 50 weeks in a year totals to 240,000 interruptions during one year's time. I was incredulous. To create a mental image, all of those interruptions are like small cuts bleeding away from our productivity time.

I concluded from one portion of his article that each person stands a pretty good chance of being his own worst enemy in this regard because questions flit through our minds

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many, many times a day as we deal with one assignment given to us by our supervisor while other assignments for our time are given by ourselves to accomplish later in the day, or are working on our minds at the same time. We become multi-taskers. This man says that doesn't work in terms of efficiency. He says what happens is when a mind is divided, neither the assigned job nor our own mental excursion is getting full concentrated attention. However, he says, no matter the source of the distraction, the switch in attention, whether the switch involves something enjoyable or onerous, is the real problem. How do you hang on to your focus? He could not get to deep in this short article. I'm only going to deal with one or two small things—suggestions that he makes.

Crenshaw then quoted a company called Basex Research. Their research found that the average knowledge worker loses 28% of work day time on the job due to interruptions themselves *and* the recovery time associated with the interruption. You do not shift gears all that quick away from the distraction. Crenshaw then stated that he found that figure—28% of a work day—extremely accurate as a result of his own personal field experience. He said that may not seem like much, but that 28% adds up to the equivalent of losing an entire work week each month. Are you beginning to see why these people hire people like Crenshaw? It is a large business expense of people simply being distracted. They have the job, they have the assignment, but they are not producing at the rate that the boss feels they should. That means that these distractions one might consider as nothing more than a quick question are, in reality, pretty expensive costs against the profitability of a business.

Do you know what he cited as one of the most effective tools for producing interruptions in our modern business environment? Emails. Emails. Emails have taken the place of a quick trip to a fellow workers work desk, as it did in former years. Now he just sends a quick email with a quick and easy question on it. But he interrupts that other guy who was not expecting the email. And now the guy has to shift his concentration to a fellow worker and a question that he's having on his job. The answer is going to go back, and they are both, in many cases, going to be producing less for the interruption.

To complicate matters, emails can interrupt one's work now from exceedingly long distances. It doesn't have to be a fellow worker in the office. It could be in an office two thousand miles away, or across the ocean. Many of us grew up before the age of electronic miracles. Now, emails are really becoming a problem—an expensive problem; so much so that these efficiency experts are discovering they are—and this was underlined in the article—major, major time wasters.

My concern regarding this subject is, of course, the Kingdom of God, and our burning up much time that could be put to more productive use but is not being used well because

we seem to be magnets for distractions.

Crenshaw gave to general principles easily named that should be foundational to those who want to be more productive in their relationship with God. Athletes know full well that defense wins games. If you can keep your opponent from scoring, he can't win. So here is the first suggestion he makes: We must resolve to organize our use of work time by playing defense against all the assaults against our attention. You know what this makes you? You're you're that meany that resides in that desk about halfway across the room who always says "no" because he wants to get done with his work. His defense is to ignore the email. His defense is to ignore the quick question. And, of course, to do it without insulting the guy who's asking the questions or sent the email. But, he said, that's the first point. That's where you begin. You begin to set your will against responding.

Second, he says we have to really get serious about this by actually planning strategies to expand work time, to lengthen concentrated *use* time. In other words, we do not interrupt ourselves by letting it on idea flit through our mind that grabs our attention, maybe for just seconds, but it's something that we then chart off to the side, "I'm going to do that tonight, right after I get home from work." He says this one means going on the offense to motivate oneself to be more disciplined while actively working. This is something he trains himself to do.

Under those two overall principles, he stated that since most jobs have routines associated with them, that must be kept up with, one must set *rigid* finish lines: "I am *going* to accomplish this today by such and such a time." Rigid finish lines.

Would you like to be in a race where the finish line keeps getting further and further away because you're dwaddling along while you are supposed to be running at full speed? You could never win in that way. But that maybe illustrates what's happening here. We get interrupted. We pay attention to the distraction, and the finish line on the job that we had been assigned by our supervisor begins fading into the distance.

He said that he has found that workers who have a "I'll just work as long as it takes" approach do not usually accomplish much because their goal is unclear and results in the finish line continuing to move further and further away. This person, he says, has actually set himself to allow time for distractions.

A case in point that applies to our calling is study and prayer. These are two continuous routine responsibilities for a Christian. Are they hard wired into your daily responsibilities? That's the finish line for us. We are going to spend such and such a

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time concentrating on prayer, concentrating on Bible study. Is there a start and finish line established for each and every day, come hell or high water, for these two routine responsibilities we have in our relationship with God? Is God such a vibrant reality to us that missing talking to Him is something we must not miss?

Are we hardwired? On the other hand, having Him talk to us through study also can set a more rigid finish line approach, because the conclusion is reached. In some cases, the only study aid needed might be a concordance and some good hard thinking. So whether prayer or study, they must be consistently and purposefully done in order to be most productive. We are heading toward the goal that we established before we sat down, and we are going to reach it. If we do not work to make them purposeful, then study and prayer can become virtually useless.