

TOP 5

Productivity Killers & How to Stop Them

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Think about a day at the practice. Do interruptions thwart productivity? The buzzing of a cell phone? Bickering team members? If you examine your day, the key factors that bring productivity to a slow crawl or even a screeching halt can be easily identified.

TOP 5 PRODUCTIVITY KILLERS

- ▶ Cell Phones
- ▶ Gossip
- ▶ Internet Time
- ▶ Breaks
- ▶ Toxic Team Members

Research by the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*¹ has shown that interruptions can double and at times even triple employees' error rates, cause short-term memory loss, increase physical ailments (eg, headaches, back pain), and lead to exhaustion. Interruptions are hazardous to your health, and to the health and wellbeing of your patients.

Combat the negative effects of interruptions by recognizing productivity killers—then know what to do about them. Here are the top 5 workplace productivity killers.²⁻⁴

1 Cell Phones
Whether the cell phone is your own or that of a client or team member, you are likely to be interrupted by a cell phone at some point during the day. Today's cell phone dependency makes it necessary to evaluate its appropriate use in the practice.

Establish a cell phone etiquette policy that is sensitive to the needs of the practice team and clients. For example:

- ▶ Allow team members to use their cell phones for family communication
- ▶ Allow team members to use their cell phones to research patient-care information

In the examination room, set the policy that the veterinarian should silence his or her phone and place it in his or her pocket or on the counter as a

signal to the client to silence his or her phone as well. A sign requesting that cell phones be silenced can also be posted in the examination room.

2 Gossip
Left unchecked, gossip can lower morale and productivity. Gossip causes a toxic environment that directly impacts productivity due to interruptions, wasting time, rifts among team members, and stress.

To prevent gossip from killing practice productivity, take a stand. Walk away from gossipers and refrain from participating, or address the gossipers one-on-one and encourage "gossip" that promotes positivity, such as excellent patient care and client service.

Poor communication or lack of information about business decisions or procedures can lead to gossip when team members fill the void with speculation and negative talk. An educated, well-informed team will not need to waste time gossiping.

3 Internet Time
The internet itself is not a productivity killer—the killer is how time is spent on the internet. How many times have you gone online to search for something and an hour later you are offtrack and no closer to completing the search. The inability to prioritize and maintain self-control is the problem.

Consider locking specific sites (eg, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) as a deterrent for those looking for a quick scroll through their favorite site. Exceptions can be made for certain workstations. A web filter (eg, Trend Micro) can be used to block websites on certain computers, the practice can choose to not block websites on those used by managers and in examination rooms.⁵ Useful websites such as YouTube can be added to computers in examination rooms to enhance client education. Trend Micro has an app that outlines practice policies that can be

used on practice-owned cell phones. Some applications (eg, SelfControl, Freedom, FocusWriter)⁶ market themselves as a way to help users avoid visiting websites that are distracting from work.⁶ Many servers typically have access restriction features, as do routers and WiFi access points. Explore options with the practice's information technology department or practice information management system providers.

4 Breaks
Establish a break policy that not only addresses the issues below but also lets the team know it is okay to take a break. The policy should include:

- ▶ How long breaks should be
- ▶ How many breaks can be taken during a specific period (ie, morning, afternoon, shift)
- ▶ Who should be notified when a team member takes a break (ie, management, the immediate supervisor only)
- ▶ How to handle a team member who is abusing the number or duration of breaks (eg, requiring time clock documentation, confirming breaks with the supervisor, establishing goals and monitoring improvement). Refer to practice policy when discussing infractions with any individual team member.

Check state and local laws and be familiar with the legal requirements regarding breaks. The Fair Labor Standards Act does not require breaks, but your state may have different laws. Also, getting paid for break time is not required unless the break is 20 minutes or less, or if the employee continues to work while taking the break. (For example, consider the CSR who eats lunch and

grabs the phone if it rings too many times—they get paid for the break time). Additionally, there are special break rules for minors, so it is best to check with your state labor department.

Toxic Team Members

5 Nothing destroys productivity more than team members who underperform, bully, complain, or behave passive-aggressively. For example, 50% of respondents to a 2014 Productivity Impact Study said their productivity and motivation were directly affected by team members.⁷

Even just a few toxic team members can negatively influence the entire team's productivity. Management must step in and hold team members accountable. First, clearly communicate expectations (eg, deadlines, policies, acceptable socialization, required performance goals). Next, focus on individual problem behaviors (eg, privately discussing any failure to meet expectations, enforcing performance improvement).

ENDING INTERRUPTIONS

A 2010 study of human healthcare workers found that visual aids (eg, signs noting quiet zones or requests not to interrupt in specific areas where medications were being dispensed) significantly reduced the frequency of interruptions.^{4,8} The visual aids included:

- ▶ Signs noting quiet zones
- ▶ Signs requesting "No interruptions"
- ▶ Brightly colored hats*
- ▶ Zones marked by colored tape on the floor*

*Visual cues without hanging signs or telling people not to interrupt, which may be perceived as rude.

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Finally, examine the practice layout and designate quiet zones. Positive, engaged team members always outperform those who are complacent and negative.

Conclusion

Interruptions have been proven to be real productivity killers. (See **Ending Interruptions**.) It is imperative to establish practice protocols that help team members recognize the culprits and then take action to correct the problems and prevent their recurrence. ■

RESOURCES

- ▶ 5 Psychological Theories of Motivation to Increase Productivity. Contactzilla.com. contactzilla.com/blog/5-psychological-theories-motivation-increase-productivity
- ▶ Brain, Interrupted. *The New York Times*. Sullivan B, Thompson H. nytimes.com/2013/05/05/opinion/sunday/a-focus-on-distraction.html
- ▶ Multitasking is Killing Your Brain. Kim L. *The Mission*. medium.com/the-mission/multitasking-is-killing-your-brain-79104e62e930
- ▶ Pew Research Center. Mobile Fact Sheet. pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile
- ▶ Spending 10 Minutes a Day on Mindfulness Subtly Changes the Way You React to Everything. Hougaard R, Carter J, Dybkjaer G. *Harvard Business Review*. hbr.org/2017/01/spending-10-minutes-a-day-on-mindfulness-subtly-changes-the-way-you-act-to-everything
- ▶ Why You Need to Stop Thinking You Are Too Busy to Take Breaks. Seiter C. Fast Company. fastcompany.com/3034928/why-you-need-to-stop-thinking-you-are-too-busy-to-take-breaks

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8. Rivera AJ, Karsh B. Interruptions and Distractions in Healthcare: Review and Reappraisal. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3007093>. Published April 8, 2010. Accessed September 2018.



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plans that consistently produce results. The practices she consults with include large specialty hospitals with 100-plus team members, companion animal referral centers, mixed animal practices, and single veterinarian practices.

FUN FACT: Besides all aspects of practice management and mentoring, Louise's passions include her husband, Joel; English mastiffs Zuri and Annabelle, the wonder-dogs; kayaking; opera; and New England Patriots football.