

It's Good to Be You™ Women's Health

MONEY

Calls from Mom may make you smile, but save the chat-fest for home.



Psst...the real juice is, all that yammering with office buds is totally eating away your workday.



Work less, do more

The average woman wastes up to 5.6 hours of her workday. Here are 20 ways to get them back. *By Nicole Blades*

CAll of us are guilty. Sometime during the day, we decide to ignore our to-do list and instead e-mail our homegirl about last night's *Grey's Anatomy* episode. Or we stretch our legs by heading over to the office kitchen, where we proceed to chat about the "no space heaters" memo. Or we pause our looming project to get a YouTube or Facebook fix.

While chilling on the company clock might seem like a working person's right, all those mental breaks are costing you. According to Kathleen Alessandro, president of the consulting firm Energized Solutions, in Dearborn, Michigan, "E-mail pings, phone calls, blogs, IMs, texts, cubicle chitchat, and undefined meetings are taking an enormous chunk out of your plan for a productive day."

Alessandro estimates that one intrusion occurs every seven minutes and lasts an average of five minutes (including the time it takes to remember what you were doing before the interruption). That means up to 68 disruptions a day. All told, that's 340 minutes, or 5.6 hours, gone from every day.

So we've come up with 20 genius ways to avoid workplace time-sucks. They'll help you get more actual work done at the office so you can get out of there—and get your life back.

Untangle the web of distraction

It's hard to remember what life was like before we could download hundreds of pics of Christian Bale at our cubicles. Add stuffed inboxes to the mix and it's a perfect storm of mis-spent hours. But as Alessandro sees it, "just because we can now communicate in a nanosecond doesn't mean we should."

It's time to implement new rules, says Wendy Kaufman, president of Balancing Life's Issues, an executive-training company in Ossining, New York. Here's how to start: **Get off the lists.** Unsubscribe from any e-mailed updates, newsletters, and press releases that do not pertain to your job. **Tighten your e-mail filter.** Set your spam blocker to "high."

Create a digital "casual reading" file. This is an e-mail filter that, once set, sends all non-spam newsletters to a special file. That way, the intriguing headlines of your e-mail subscriptions won't distract you throughout the day. Alessandro says, even though you'll still be able to see that you have unread articles. Once a week, on legitimate breaks, get a cup of coffee and read them. (To take care of this using Outlook, go to the Rules/Alerts section of Tools and create a folder called "Casual Reading," then check the box called "Move mail for someone to a folder.") **Send less to receive less.** "The average person spends three months per year processing e-mail," says productivity expert Karen Cynowa, president of Time's Up Consulting, in Auburn Hills, Michigan. The reason you get so much e-mail is that you send so much—needlessly. Say you're out of the office, on your BlackBerry, and without access to the information someone's just asked you for. Instead of

YOUR WORKDAY IN A NUTSHELL

How the typical woman spends her 8-hour shift*



ANDREW MCLEOD

I vote for talking more about last night's 'Letterman.'



Two hours later, and this mouth has better things to say.



"I think we'll cover more ground over cocktails later on."

immediately e-mailing numerous people trying to get it (and triggering a flood of replies in the process), ask the sender for a deadline. Then answer in full after you're back in the office and have the information at hand.

Reply less to receive less.

There's no need to respond to everything. Your "Thanks" only extends a long e-mail chain. **Limit e-mail checks to three per day.** If that's too cold-turkey, Cynowa suggests once every hour. "Advise others that if [an issue] is critical, they should call you," Alessandro says.

Turn off alerts. The seemingly harmless ding of an arriving message actually creates a massive disruption. "It takes up to 64 seconds to recover the pace of your workflow after an e-mail interruption," Cynowa says.

Change your send/receive schedule. This sked dictates how often your system connects to your server to check for and send new messages. The typical default setting is every five minutes. Make yours every 30. "This will save up to 80 interruptions daily," Cynowa says. (For info on how to change yours, go to office.microsoft.com and do a search for "schedule when a send/receive command runs" plus the year of your version of Outlook.) **D it up.** When it's time to actually

answer e-mail, Cynowa says, immediately take some action on each one. "Either do it now, defer it, delegate it, or delete it," she says. To keep track of the deferred or delegated ones, Cynowa suggests dragging the e-mail into the task folder or the calendar in Outlook so it opens a new appointment or to-do item. **Stop being so chatty.** Make all your replies succinct. "E-mail is meant for the quick message," Kaufman says. "Cover just the basics of who, what, and when."

Sidestep pointless powwows

You can defer reading e-mail until you have the time and brain cells to properly tackle it. But what about meetings—the ones you walk out of hours later with a blank notepad and no idea what just happened? According to corporate consultant and wellness coach Gabriela Cora, M.D., M.B.A., the author of *Leading Under Pressure*, there are some simple ways to keep meetings from derailing your day:

- Decide whether you need to be there.** Is your presence essential? If not, send your regrets.
- Avoid meetings with no agenda.** Ask for one, and if none is forthcoming, politely decline.
- Schedule meetings to last one hour.** If you're in charge, impose

a strict time limit. "Start and end on time," Cora says. "This will give everyone a sense of urgency and commitment." **Ask for three solutions per problem.** Prepare a one-page agenda with three to five points. For each, limit everyone to no more than three solutions. Less talk, more action. **Keep a jibber-jabber journal.** For two days, note your casual rap sessions and whether they're helpful. You'll be surprised. **Set limits on chitchat.** Gently inform your gossipy coworker that you have X minutes. When time's up, say you must get back to work, suggesting that part two be continued after hours.

Rebalance your power

Studies show that productivity and personal effectiveness vary with the time of day and the day of the week. Make sure you're using your prime time for prime assignments: **Observe the 80-20 rule.** "Use the first 20 percent of your day—that's 96 minutes—to tackle the most important tasks," Alessandro says. Then, even if time wasters creep in, you will have made some progress. **Reserve the toughest stuff for your prime times.** Mary Crane, a Denver-based business-life

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expert, recommends scheduling "major cognitive tasks" (reading, calculating, problem-solving) for 8 a.m. to noon, when your mind is sharpest. "Night owls should adjust everything to three or four hours later," Crane says. The day of the week also makes a difference, she says. We focus best on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. **Set aside time to organize.** Choose half a day once every week or two to take care of back-office things: clearing out your inbox, filing, doing expenses, Alessandro says. **Do one thing at a time.** "Multitasking is making us crazy," Alessandro says. Take the time to do a task right the first time and save your double-duty act for no-brainers like walking the dog while exercising. Now get back to work! ■

*Data provided by Kathleen Alessandro