

Discovering the benefits of being interrupted by colleagues at work

*The negative effects of work interruptions are well documented: difficulties moving ahead with tasks, time-pressure, stress, and lowered productivity. Managers often look for ways to eliminate, or at least minimise such interruptions. But a new study by **Harshad Puranik, Joel Koopman, and Heather C. Vough** shows an upside to these workplace interruptions: increased feelings of belonging.*

With vaccines for COVID-19 becoming more accessible, organisations are starting to reopen for in-person work. As more employees return to their offices, and workplaces get busier, employees will likely experience the resurgence of a common workplace phenomenon—work interruptions. For example, co-workers often pop in unexpectedly to provide updates, ask for help, or to catch up; supervisors drop by to give new tasks or check in on tasks; subordinates come in to seek guidance; and clients call about their orders.

The negative effects of these work interruptions, such as the difficulty of moving ahead with one's tasks, and the resulting time-pressure, stress, and lowered productivity, have been well-documented. It is not surprising, then, that managers often look for ways to eliminate, or at least minimise such interruptions. But the results of our [recent study](#) indicate that there might also be an upside to these workplace interruptions.

The social side of workplace interruptions and its benefits

You may wonder how being interrupted by others could be a good thing. The answer is that the experience of being interrupted may actually increase feelings of belongingness due to the interactions with the interrupter. Work interruptions have two aspects. First, they get in the way of completing work tasks and that's where the negative effects happen. Being forced to repeatedly switch tasks due to interruptions takes a toll on employees' energy and lowers their job satisfaction. However, beyond this task-based aspect, being interrupted by others also has a social aspect to it—interaction with the interrupter.

This social component has been largely ignored by prior research, as the dominant conversation about interruptions has focused exclusively on their negative, task-based effects. Our study, however, shows that employees may benefit from the social interactions that occur during these work interruptions. Indeed, if we have learned one thing from the last year of social distancing and isolation, it is that humans are inherently social creatures with a fundamental need for social interaction. Research from social psychology suggests that the need for social connection and belongingness is evolutionarily hard-wired and is an important contributor to our psychological well-being (e.g., [Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#)).

We find that the social interactions necessitated by work interruptions help interrupted employees fulfil their need to belong. This is crucial, however our study found something else on top of this. That is, this positive effect flowing from the social aspect can also actually *undo* the concurrent negative effects arising from the task-based aspect of the interruption. Thus, the social aspect provided a crucial counterpoint to the negative effects of the task-based aspect of interruptions and, in fact, enhanced employees' well-being. This means that instead of the negative experience they are often made out to be, being interrupted at work can be a net positive for the well-being of employees.

The finding of a potential beneficial side to it calls into question the current popular advocacy for the elimination of all work interruptions. Doing away with interruptions could result in employees losing out on the benefits flowing from the social aspect revealed in our study. Hence, instead of complete elimination of work interruptions, we call for better management of these interruptions, with the aim of enhancing the benefits of their social aspect and reducing the negative effects of their task-based aspect. Below, we provide some specific recommendations for how to do this:

1) Be mindful when interrupting others

Being mindful of the negative and positive effects of work interruptions can help employees manage the implications of interrupting others. They need to be mindful of two things. First, they need to be careful not to interrupt others too frequently, causing the other person to constantly switch their attention from one task to another, which can be draining. Thus, the first way to be mindful when interrupting others is to interrupt only when it is necessary to do so.

Second, in light of the benefits of the social aspect of work interruptions, to the extent that one must interrupt others, one can work in at least some level of small talk during the work interruption—indeed, recent research on small talk in the workplace has highlighted the benefits of this behaviour ([Methot et al., in press](#)). In this way, what may appear on the face of it as wasting time may be opportunities to connect and enhance employees' sense of belonging and job satisfaction. To this point, we found that interruptions that had a greater social element to them were more strongly related to feelings of belongingness than those that were mainly task-focused in nature. Further, expressing regret or apologising to the interrupted person for disturbing them in the middle of their work can be a simple, yet effective, way of showing that one values their time, which can foster a sense of being valued and a feeling of belongingness for the interrupted employee.

2) Provide autonomy over work and over the handling of interruptions

We also found that when employees had control over when, where, and how they worked, the positive effects of work interruptions were enhanced. As such, managers should consider giving employees autonomy over their work and their interruptions, specifically, to capitalise on their positive effects and reduce the negative side.

First, having more autonomy at work could mean that people may find interruptions less burdensome. The reason is that when employees have autonomy, they can easily modify their work schedules or even deadlines to ensure they resume and complete the interrupted task in a timely manner. Thus, they can feel free to engage in social interactions during work interruptions without the fear of repercussions for their work. In contrast, without such autonomy, employees' concerns for completing their work in time may be exacerbated by work interruptions. As such, the positive effects of the social aspect of work interruptions may be more muted than in the previous case.

Second, more work autonomy could also mean that employees have the capacity to arrange their work schedules in a way that most of their work interruptions are clustered together during a specific part of their workday when they have a lower workload or have more time and energy to deal with work interruptions. For example, employees might implement a "stoplight" model for interruptions. They could post on their door a graphic that they can change to indicate green, yellow, or red. When the graphic shows green, all interruptions are welcome. When the graphic shows yellow, interruptions are welcome, as long as they are important and time sensitive. When the graphic shows red, in contrast, interruptions should be kept to a minimum. Such an approach allows employees to have intense focus on their work when necessary, but also to benefit from the social interactions of work interruptions when they will not be highly disruptive to their work. Thus, more autonomy at work may reduce the negative task-based effects of interruptions and enhance the positive effects of the social aspect of interruptions.

Overall, work interruptions by others in the workplace may not be the motivation killer that they have been made out to be, and it may be helpful to, within limits, encourage rather than discourage such interruptions in the workplace. Given the inevitability of work interruptions in today's dynamic workplaces and the potential beneficial effect of these interruptions, we call on managers to bring a fundamental shift in the way they view these workplace occurrences. Rather than viewing work interruptions as undesirable events that need to be eradicated, we call on managers to focus on better management of work interruptions so as to reduce their negative effects and enhance their positive effects on employee well-being.



Notes:

- *This blog is based on [Excuse me, do you have a minute? An exploration of the dark- and bright-side effects of daily work interruptions for employee well-being](#), *Journal of Applied Psychology* (forthcoming).*

- *The post expresses the views of its author(s), and do not necessarily represent those of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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