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# Planning for Idle Time and Interruptions


If your workday is plagued by idle time and interruptions, new research shows how to turn them to your advantage.

**Based on the research of Andrew Brodsky**



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In his high school days, Texas McCombs Assistant Professor of Management [Andrew Brodsky](#) worked at a video rental store. Weekends could be intense, but weeknights were often so slow that he'd sit around watching videos.

As he worked other jobs, he noticed his experience was common.

“When I was younger, I assumed that organizations were efficient, well-oiled machines,” says Brodsky. “After I started working, I realized there were all these inefficiencies in them. People’s productivity could be blocked by factors outside their control.”

If inefficient workflow was so typical, Brodsky wondered, was it always a bad thing? In two studies published this year, he has found that it's not. Not only is inefficiency common on the job, but planning for it can make employees more efficient. “It can be rationally built into the day,” he says.

Pressing too hard for efficiency, by contrast, can boomerang and hurt employee morale. “If you have to look busy 40 hours a week,” he says, “it can be quite stressful.”

### **The Dread of Deadtime**

Ever since the first Model T automobile rolled out of the Ford Motor Co. factory, the predictable flow of the assembly line has been the model of business efficiency. But the service economy has changed all that, Brodsky says. Over a day, someone’s workload can go through peaks and valleys.

“In a restaurant, you need enough waiters to handle a rush of customers coming in,” he says. “But when you’re not at peak time, they might have nothing to do. They have to pretend to be busy, even if it’s nonsensical to do so.”

Idle time can add up. When Brodsky and Teresa Amabile of the Harvard Business School surveyed 1,003 people who worked outside the home, 78 percent had hours during the week with no work to do. For 22 percent of the workers, downtime was a daily occurrence. Extrapolating to the entire U.S. workforce, that added up to 7.4 billion hours and at least \$100 billion in wages each year.

The expense could be psychological as well as economic, they suspected. Workers who expect to run out of work might drag it out.

To find out, the researchers assigned jobs to 904 participants. Each had to type two sets of 46 sentences. When they finished the first set, half were allowed to move right on to the second. Others had to wait until a timer went off.

Those stuck with waiting took an average of 14 percent longer to finish the task than those who didn't. The closer they got to completion, the more they dawdled.

Brodsky calls such slowdowns the "deadtime effect." Stretching out work to avoid idle time can be harmful, he says, because it makes employees unavailable if other unexpected tasks arise. It also reduces their motivation. "We don't like being very busy, but having nothing to do can also be stressful," he says.

### **An Upside to Downtime**

There's a way to counter the deadtime effect, the study also found: Treat idle time as leisure time, and let workers choose how to use it.

The researchers gave 107 subjects the same tasks as the first group, with one important difference. Half were told that once they were done typing, they could use their remaining time to surf the internet. Those subjects finished up 9 percent faster than the rest, with no loss in accuracy.

*Brodsky concludes that banning internet access on the job might be a mistake. “Make idle time more acceptable,” he recommends. “Rather than encouraging them to hide it, allow them to take breaks.”*

He suggests setting aside a break room with coffee or video games. Besides removing the stigma from downtime, he says, it can help ensure that these leisure activities aren't secretly being overused for procrastination.

### **Planning for the Unplanned**

Another threat to efficiency is interruption. In typical time-management planning, employees prioritize goals for the day. But unexpected demands from others can wreak havoc on their neat lists. According to one study, it happens every three minutes.

“You get emails from other workers,” says Brodsky. “You get an urgent request from your manager. If you have lots of interruptions, your planning goes haywire.”

But Brodsky believes it's possible to plan for interruptions. He calls it “contingent planning.” It means predicting possible disruptions and making Plan B's in case they strike.

“I might be planning to write a paper today,” he says. “But I get an email from my department head saying I need to do some administrative task.” By the time he wraps up the unplanned task, he doesn't have time to write the paper. So he turns to other goals on his list that take less time and focus.

To test such strategies, Brodsky and four colleagues — Michael Parke of the London Business School, Justin Weinhardt of the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, Subrahmaniam Tangirala of the University of Maryland,

College Park, and Sanford DeVoe of the University of California, Los Angeles — surveyed 221 employees. Each morning at 10 a.m., they answered questions about how they planned to tackle their day. At 3:30 p.m., they reported how their plans had played out and what levels of interruptions they'd suffered.

On days with low levels of interruptions, both prioritizing daily goals and contingent planning boosted performance. But with high levels — 19 percent of the time — contingent planning stayed effective, while traditional planning did not. Says Brodsky, “You’ve figured out alternative courses of action, if you’re interrupted. You’ve made your plans more flexible.”

*If your job falls into the 19 percent, Brodsky advises, “Think about the external factors and how you will react to them.”*

Even if you’re not sure you’ll get sidetracked, he adds, build in buffer time, just in case. On the flip side, you can make a list of extra tasks to tackle if you don’t get interrupted.

In a follow-up study, he’s looking at Flipd — a smartphone app that blocks other apps, when you want to work free of distractions. He’ll see whether it makes you more productive.

In the meantime, Brodsky preaches the virtues of inefficiency. Businesses can view interruptions and idle time as obstacles, or they can view them as a resource. “Organizations put pressures on employees to seem busy,” he says, “but there can be good reasons for idle time. You need employees to be available if the unexpected comes up.”

*“The Downside of Downtime: The Prevalence and Work Pacing Consequences of Idle Time at Work”* was published May 2018 in the Journal of Applied Psychology.

*“When Daily Planning Improves Employee Performance: The Importance of Planning Type, Engagement, and Interruptions”* was published March 2018 in the Journal of Applied Psychology.

*Story by Steve Brooks*

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