



Why We Can't Focus at Work

FOCUS WORK DEFINED

A task requiring sustained (uninterrupted) attention that can vary in amount of mental effort.

How long to sustain attention *depends on* the task. How much mental effort needed *depends on* the person.

The less one knows, the more effort is needed. Learning takes more deliberate effort. When mastery is achieved, tasks are more automated.

Inability to complete focus work continues to be a top complaint of employees. Why can't we solve this problem? Because different work activities often compete with one another, focus work tasks themselves can differ, and people's abilities differ—there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. Knowing the ways that focus work is task- and person-specific can help you create a workplace—its culture, policies, and the variety of workspaces—to meet all the ways employees need to work, including focus work.

3 CULPRITS THAT SABOTAGE FOCUS WORK



Distractions

When unexpected off-task information captures our attention.

Just because it's unexpected, doesn't mean it's not beneficial to the person—even if it affects task performance.



Interference

When off-task information gets confused with task information.

Unhelpful to the task, but might prompt switching to a new, more important task.



Interruptions

When a distraction or interference pulls us off a task entirely to start a new task.

Oftentimes, these are also useful and necessary.

Useful: serendipitous encounters with colleagues and constructive mind wandering.¹

Necessary: seeking safety prompted by a fire alarm or severe weather siren.

Who is best to decide if an interruption is useful or necessary?
The person doing the work.

¹ Johnson and Scott, 2017.

If the goal for workplaces is to better protect focus work, we must consider how the duration of required, sustained attention varies by tasks and how mental effort varies by person. In a series of controlled experiments in our Human Performance Lab, we tested how visual and auditory distractions and interference affected performance on tasks requiring sustained attention.

DISTRACTION & INTERFERENCE EFFECTS ON PERFORMANCE

We found that performance declined, on average, between three and 23 percent when people were exposed to visual and auditory distractions or interference.² The more challenging the task, the more deliberate the effort, and the bigger the effect on performance.

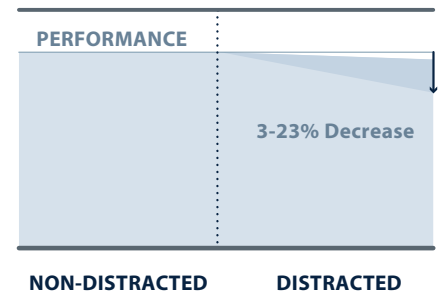
WHAT HELPS FOCUS WORK?

Align your culture, policies, and the workspaces. Culture guides adequate active to quiet zone ratios and reinforces norms for appropriate interruptions. Workspace design should reflect these, be legible while separating such zones, and mitigate visual and auditory distractions and interference. Some strategies are below.

Allowing people to work un-interrupted and on a single task until they are complete or when at a natural break is key to managing interruptions. We know that removing physical barriers allows us to be more aware of our colleagues,³ but knowing when and where to interrupt each other is highly dependent upon the social norms in place.⁴ Establish and practice honoring both individual focus work and appropriate interruptions.

Visual barriers and orientation manage visual distractions and interference. Walls work best for more deliberate tasks. Next best is a panel at least 50" high for seated positions. This gives enough protection as a full wall when auditory distractions aren't present.⁵ For more automated tasks, adjusting your orientation to face a direction that minimizes visual activity is helpful.

Absorbing, blocking, and covering sound manage auditory distractions and interference.⁶ Overheard speech is particularly problematic, since our brains start processing and comprehending language before we are aware of it.⁷ The more difficult it is to understand speech—say, when listening to only half of a phone conversation—the more mental effort is used and the more disruptive that speech is to more deliberate tasks.^{8, 9} To reduce the effects of irrelevant speech, ensure spaces have adequate signal-to-noise ratio through appropriate background sound levels.¹⁰



WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Get more in-depth information about how our brains help and hurt our focus work efforts, and find strategies for managing distractions, interference, and interruptions in our white paper "**Why We Can't Focus at Work**" and corresponding **interactive PDF**.

² Johnson et al., 2019.

³ Gutwin and Greenberg, 2002.

⁴ Wiberg, 2005; Baethge, Rigotti, and Roe, 2014.

⁵ Johnson, 2017.

⁶ Goodchild and Johnson, 2018.

⁷ Parmentier and Kefauver, 2015.

⁸ Emberson et al., 2010.

⁹ Marsh et al., 2017, 2018.

¹⁰ Goodchild and Johnson, 2018.

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