



# Blue Collar University®

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## Why People Interrupt You at Work and How to Stop Them

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The Blue Collar University Podcast

**Why People Keep Interrupting You At Work and What to Do About It**

How Disruptions Affect Productivity

The OODA Loop

Act, Orient, Decide

BANG!

PodBean

The image shows a podcast cover for 'The Blue Collar University Podcast'. The title is 'Why People Keep Interrupting You At Work and What to Do About It'. The cover features a circular diagram with four nodes: 'Act', 'Orient', 'Decide', and 'Act' (repeated). The text 'How Disruptions Affect Productivity' and 'The OODA Loop' is also present. A 'BANG!' icon is at the top. The PodBean logo is in the bottom right corner.

I was having a conversation with Brodie, a client, and a friend of mine and I asked him what irritates him the most at work. Brodie is a project manager for pipeline construction and oil lease facilities. He takes his job and personal growth seriously.

Brodie said, "Nothing pisses me off more than being interrupted while I'm focused at work", "I'm sitting at my desk reading or writing a report or trying to understand software I am not familiar with and quite possibly hate using. The interruption feels like they threw a flash-bang grenade at me."

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**The shocking truth about workplace interruptions.** Image by [Gerd Altmann](#) from [Pixabay](#)

"How do I deal with that?"

Brodie is frustrated because when he's focused on a task, interruptions are as disorienting as a flash-bang. While we think of a flash-bang as a mechanical device, it's actually a psychological device. The noise and light are meant to break our concentration and focus on the interruption. This is how:

It's called the [OODA Loop](#), a term coined by Air Force Major John Boyd that businesses, TV ads, your children, and SWAT teams use to disrupt a person's attention.

**OODA** stands for Observe – Orient – Decide – Act. It looks like this:

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In the case of a SWAT team, the flash-bang starts the OODA loop – the person can't ignore it and has to **Observe** something other than what they are currently focused on. They have to break their train of thought.

That is what happens when someone interrupts your work. You have to pay attention to them – **Observe** the interruption, which breaks your train of thought.

Then you have to **Orient** yourself to the interruption. You turn away from *your* work and turn toward the interruption. Your brain is switching tasks.

Now, you have to **Decide** what to do.

Do you deal with the issue the interruption brings? Or do you ignore it? Either way, you have to make a decision. Which causes you to lose even more focus on the task you were concentrating on.

Once you've made that decision, you have to **Act** on it. You have to either completely stop working on the spreadsheet, or completely ignore the interrupter.

### **And Then This Happens . . .**

Research shows that you lose up to half an hour getting back to your original task. Every time. If you get interrupted five times a day you lose more than two hours of focused work. If you think you can handle both the interruption and your work, then you need to know that [research](#) also shows you might be losing as much as 40% of your productivity when you multi-task.

In either case, when you have dealt with the interruption, guess what? You have to make yourself do it all over again. You have to look around – **observe** – your workplace, re-**orient** to your task, **decide** what you were going to do next, then **act** on it.

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frustrated and angry at unnecessary interruptions not just because they waste time but also  
it requires more energy to refocus. What people don't realize is that it is the same energy

source as the body uses for other operations- like, breathing. So a day full of interruptions leaves you feeling tired and sapped of energy.

The deeper you are focused on their task, the worse the effect. And the more important you believe it is to finish the task, the worse the effect.

### **The Fix(es)**

The answer to Brodie's dilemma was simple in concept and easy to implement if you have the guts to do it.

The main thing you have to do is *tell people that you don't want to be interrupted unless it's an emergency.*

**You have to tell them.** You don't like your boss changing the rules without telling you. No one does.

If you don't tell them and they keep interrupting you and you let them keep interrupting you, you are training them that it's okay to interrupt you.

You are training them that it is okay to throw a flashbang at you. You have created your own nightmare.

So, how do you tell people that it would be really bad for them to interrupt you?

### **Here are the 5 actions I use and recommend:**

*First – have the conversation.* Tell everybody that you have signs and times when you need to focus on your job. And tell them that your job is to make them successful so you need your time to get your work done.

*Second – separate yourself physically from interruption.* Close the door to your office or put on a set of headphones. Even if you have an open-door policy, you have to do this. An open-door policy means that people can come to talk to you about what is going on at work. It's good information and you need that information. A closed-door doesn't mean you don't want to hear it. It just means you don't want to hear it right then.

*Third – Use a sign or some other method to let people know how critical it is that they do not interrupt you.* A stop sign, green, yellow or red paper, flags, you get the idea. When I am recording a podcast I have a sign on my door that says, "On The Air!"

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I use this sign when I am recording the [Blue Collar University Podcast](#).

I know one person that has a printout of a stop-light. They change the colors to let people know how critical your time is. A piece of red, yellow, or green paper on your door or the back of your chair – someplace prominent – can send that message.

*Fourth – Stop the technology interruptions.* Notifications from texts, phone calls, and other apps like Twitter and Facebook cost you the same amount of time as someone walking in your door and spilling coffee on your desk. Use the setting on your phone to manage phone calls.

On Androids there is a setting that blocks all calls except those from 'Favorites' contacts. For people that aren't in your favorites, there is another setting that allows the phone to ring if they call back within 15 minutes. Use an app that blocks notifications from other apps like text messages, emails, and Facebook.

*Fifth – This one will take some discipline to get used to* – don't open new emails unless they are pertinent to the task at hand. Don't go down that rabbit hole. You'll never find your way back. Ever.

**Bonus tip?** A friend says she has a boss that won't take a meeting unless they have an appointment with him. The boss has a link to his calendar in his emails, so it's easy to get an appointment. Is this a sign of a closed-door policy? Not at all. It's an efficient way to run an open-door policy.

**A final note:** people will know when you use the stop sign to hide. Believe me, they'll know. Don't abuse it.

Focus. Get your work done. I know. I know. I sound like your mother.

But Brodie took these steps to minimize interruptions and got more work done and was less stressed about work. The results showed up at work and at home.

If you have other methods you have used successfully, I'd love to hear about them in the comments.

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