2018 Workplace Distraction Report

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Udemy In Depth:
2018 Workplace Distraction Report

Noisy, interruption-prone offices make employees unmotivated, stressed, and frustrated. Employers could boost morale—and their bottom line— by giving people training for staying productive despite distractions.

Virtually everything about the way we work is changing, and we'd like to think it's for the better. Companies regularly roll out new technologies and tools intended to help people do their jobs more efficiently, collaborate more directly, and boost productivity. But they've also spawned new sources of digital distraction.

The physical setting where we work has undergone a transformation too: open offices are more common than not, and there are no longer any doors or walls to create even the illusion of boundaries or privacy.

For this report, Udemy set out to measure how distracted employees are during work hours, how they're responding to distractions, and what it all means for employers and the American economy at large. Our findings indicate companies would be wise to acknowledge the challenges their workers have staying focused and provide training on soft skills like communication and time management to help maintain productivity.

70%

70% agree that training can help people block out distractions

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Today's Workforce Suffers from a Short Attention Span

Based on our survey, employers aren't doing much, if anything, to instruct workers on how to manage the constant barrage of noise, interruptions, and notifications in order to maintain performance. While companies may offer initial training on a new tool's basic functionality, they're not considering how these emerging productivity and communication tools fit into the broader landscape of distractions and, therefore, companies fail to reap all of the productivity benefits they seek.

And employees are feeling it. They're stressed, unmotivated, and feeling bad about themselves, their jobs, and their careers. Even though they think training would help them manage distraction, 66% of respondents haven't spoken to their managers about the need for more training, perhaps because they feel insecure about revealing areas of perceived weakness. Compounding matters are those "self-inflicted" distractions served up by personal devices workers just can't look away from.

Devices and technology are only becoming more pervasive, and we're all becoming more reliant on them. New generations entering the workforce have never lived any other way. While we've let devices and technologies become fixtures, we haven't reckoned with how they're undermining our ability to focus and work smart. There's been a lot of concern around the implications of too much screen time for kids, but what are these technologies doing to adults on the job?

What's needed is more training on using technology efficiently at work, but employees also need support filling in gaps in their soft skills. These include fundamentals like achieving focus and time management as well as dealing with distractions of the modern workplace that will help them succeed even as more new distractions are added to the mix.

TOP BENEFITS OF REDUCING WORKPLACE DISTRACTION

I get more done and I'm more productive
75%

I'm happier at work
49%

I'm motivated to do my best
57%

I deliver higher quality work
44%

I'm more confident in my ability to do my job well
51%

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The Six-Hour Workday?

To understand the impact of workplace distraction, we first needed to understand where people's attention is being pulled. Not surprisingly, chatty coworkers (80%) and office noise (70%) were cited as the top distractors overall, followed by the aforementioned changes in the workplace (61%). Among the workforce's youngest, however, the number two distraction was the smartphone, with 69% acknowledging that checking a personal device interferes with concentration.
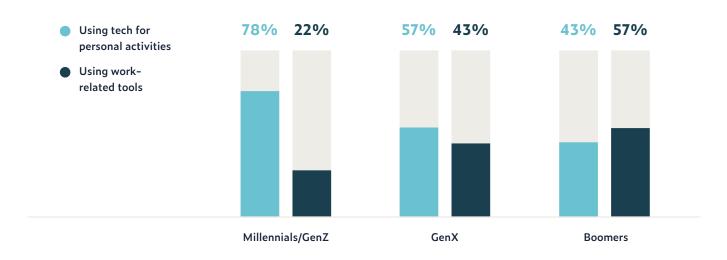
Millennials and Gen Z are also the most likely age group to describe themselves as distracted at work. Seventy-four percent of them report being distracted, and of those, 46% say it makes them feel unmotivated, and 41% say it stresses them out.

We have a smartphone problem

More than a third of millennials and Gen Z (36%) say they spend two hours or more checking their smartphones during the workday. That adds up to at least 10 hours every week when they're doing something outside their job responsibilities. This behavior isn't limited to junior workers either; overall, just under two-thirds of survey respondents (62%) spend about an hour per day looking at their phones. Meanwhile, a third of Baby Boomers claim they never engage with their personal devices at work.

Half of our work interruptions are self-inflicted[1], like switching from a task to scroll through Instagram "for just a minute," not quickly changing gears to respond to a coworker.

WHICH IS MORE DISTRACTING?

- Using tech for personal activities
- Using work-related tools

Millennials/GenZ: 78% / 22%
GenX: 57% / 43%
Boomers: 43% / 57%

[1]Source: "The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress." https://www.ics.uci.edu/~gmark/chi08-mark.pdf

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Blurred lines between personal and work

Most survey respondents (58%) said they don't need social media to do their jobs, but they still can't make it through the day without it. Though over 40% do have "occasional" work-related activity on social media, three-quarters (76%) have never received training from their employer on using it as part of their work experience. Half (51%) in our survey reported that their employers actually restrict social media use.

Among millennials and Gen Z, the ones spending upward of two hours per workday looking at their phones, an astounding 78% say personal activities are more distracting than work-related intrusions. This would seem to undermine the productivity-boosting effects employers hope to see from collaboration and communication tools like Trello, Slack, or Jira, which must compete with the irresistible pull of the smartphone.

Across the general populace, 59% agree that personal use of technology is more distracting than work tools, and Facebook is far and away the top attention thief. A whopping 86% described Facebook as a workplace distraction—twice as much as Instagram. When asked to rank various social media sites and communication tools by degree of distraction, Facebook came in first (65%), followed distantly by Instagram (9%), Snapchat (7%), and Twitter (7%).

WHAT IS YOUR #1 ONLINE DISTRACTOR?

	Overall	Millennial/Gen Z	GenX	Boomers*
Facebook	65%	58%	69%	71%
Instagram	9%	15%	9%	2%
Twitter	7%	4%	7%	11%
Snapchat	7%	11%	4%	3%

* 7% Boomers cited "email & texting" as most distracting

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Getting back on track

As distracted as they are, most workers (84%) estimate they're able to refocus within a half-hour. Sixty percent of Baby Boomers believe they can get back into the work groove in less than five minutes!

Unfortunately, other research suggests people overestimate their ability to recover from interruptions, not to mention the deleterious effects even a three-second interruption can have. According to a UC Irvine study, "People compensate for interruptions by working faster, but this comes at a price: experiencing more stress, higher frustration, time pressure, and effort." This aligns with our survey respondents saying they feel unmotivated when fighting against distraction overload. Moreover, even the briefest interruptions can double a worker's error rate.[2]

Prime time for distraction hits at midday, with 46% answering that noon to 3pm is their most distracted period. It wouldn't be a stretch to conclude that the post-lunchtime slump is killing a lot of afternoon productivity.

WHY DO MEETINGS GET DISRUPTED?

Small talk and office gossip

54%

Late arrivals/early departures

37%

Side discussion about other projects

45%

Technology/connectivity problems

33%

Meetings are distractions, which are then derailed by other distractions

If company leaders think people are fully engaged during meetings, they are sorely mistaken. Indeed, 60% of our survey respondents said meetings are just another distraction from the work they need to complete. Compounding the problem, meetings themselves frequently fall victim to interruptions and distractions.

[2]Source: "Brief Interruptions Spawn Errors." http://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2013/brief-interruptions-spawn-errors/

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Distraction is a Morale Killer

Everyone can agree they don't appreciate being distracted when they're trying to work. Employers may be surprised, however, by the emotional toll it takes. The constant barrage of interruptions actually makes 34% of our survey respondents like their jobs less.

Stress, frustration, and lack of motivation are consistent reactions across the generations, but younger workers are even more likely to disengage. Among millennials and Gen Z, 22% feel distractions prevent them from reaching their full potential and advancing in their careers. Companies need to be aware of how workplace distraction can damage employee morale and retention because it's hard to win people back once they've reached their limits.

WHAT'S THE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE DISTRACTIONS?

54% Aren't performing as well as they should

50% Say they're significantly less productive

20% Not able to reach full potential, advance in career

Employees trying to cope on their own

Despite the pervasiveness of the distraction problem, most employees haven't raised the issue with a manager, though men are more likely to have done so (41% vs. 28% women). Men are also more likely to have participated in relevant training (25% vs. 14% women).

Workers left to fend for themselves in the distraction zone have come up with a few coping mechanisms on their own. First and foremost, when they really need to focus, they turn off their phones. Most haven't tried tools or systems to prevent interruptions (e.g., "do not disturb" setting on chat or calendar, apps for blocking websites, etc.), but those who have report success, with 92% saying they continue to use those methods regularly.

TOP 3 THINGS EMPLOYEES DO TO COPE WITH DISTRACTION

43% Turn off phone during work hours

30% Music, meditation, or other relaxation techniques

26% Fill time with simple tasks that don't require as much focus

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A Learning Culture Helps People Work Smarter

Not every company can support a full learning & development (L&D) team, but any company can foster a learning culture. In a learning culture, it's safe, even encouraged, for employees to raise their hands and say they need to learn something to be better at their jobs. This doesn't mean people are unskilled or underqualified for their roles; on the contrary, it shows they are committed to delivering good work and eager to grow and develop their talent.
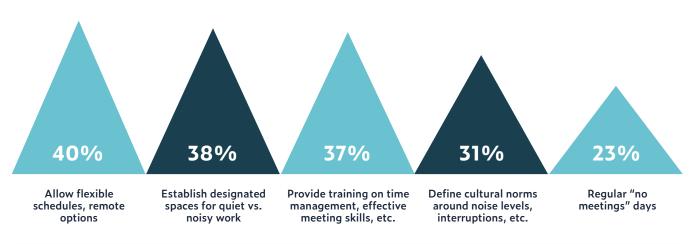
Imagine if, instead of fighting alone against distractions, people felt comfortable talking to their managers and could work together on devising strategies for staying productive? That's a far better outcome than letting stress and frustration build to the breaking point.

What they'd like from employers

In our survey, 70% respondents answered in the affirmative when asked, "Do you think training can help people get better at blocking out distractions and achieving focus?" Among millennials and Gen Z, 76% agreed. So, nearly the same percentage of people who want training have not talked to a manager about it, suggesting they don't feel like their request would be well-received or acted upon.

To be clear, training alone won't solve the distraction issue. Workers would also like more freedom to work remotely and follow flexible schedules; 52% said they're more productive when not working in a noisy office. While management may have concerns about what people are up to when they're not at their desks, our research shows a "butts in seats" mentality fails to address the very real impediments to on-site productivity.
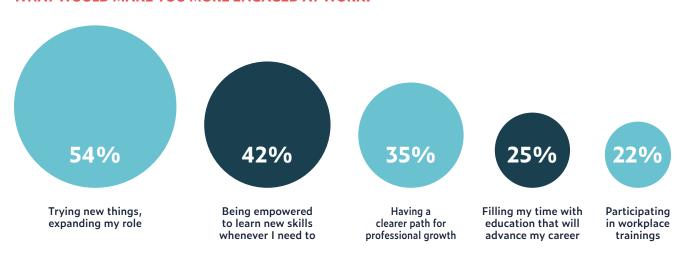
WHAT COULD YOUR EMPLOYER DO TO REDUCE WORKPLACE DISTRACTION?

40%	38%	37%	31%	23%
Allow flexible schedules, remote options	Establish designated spaces for quiet vs. noisy work	Provide training on time management, effective meeting skills, etc.	Define cultural norms around noise levels, interruptions, etc.	Regular "no meetings" days

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There's a direct connection between staying focused and productive and being an engaged employee. When they're engaged, people report being more motivated, confident, and happy, and feel they deliver higher quality work. And, based on our survey, opportunities around learning and development are the top drivers of engagement.

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU MORE ENGAGED AT WORK?

54%
Trying new things, expanding my role

42%
Being empowered to learn new skills whenever I need to

35%
Having a clearer path for professional growth

25%
Filling my time with education that will advance my career

22%
Participating in workplace trainings

Don't "leave them to their own devices"

Companies need to see how the productivity and communication tools they implement fit into the bigger picture. Training can't stop with simply showing people basic functionality like keyboard shortcuts and personalized settings. Leaders must understand and plan for how these tools fit into everything else employees must contend with so they can work smart during their busy, interruption-prone days.

But how should employers deal with the startling data on people using smartphones and looking at social media for personal reasons during the workday, particularly among millennials and Gen Z, i.e., our future business leaders?

The answer isn't to ban smartphones from the workplace. Nor is it realistic to get rid of messaging apps. But if Gen Z employees have only used their devices and technology for personal activity, they may not know how to switch gears for work. Same for open offices—no one's bringing back cubicles, and, therefore, companies need to provide guidance on staying efficient and focused in this type of environment.

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Conclusion

Workplace distractions are only going to increase at the rate we're going, but companies with a learning culture can stay attuned to where employees are struggling and design solutions and trainings that speak directly to their needs. When woven into people's everyday routine, learning can actually drive productivity and innovation, instead of becoming just another form of distraction.

In short:

- **Don't just train on functionality; train on smart, efficient usage in the context of other available tools**

- **Train on soft skills like how to maintain focus, time management, adaptability, etc., that will help employees stay productive in an ever-changing work environment**

- **Learn how to lead and participate in effective meetings so they don't succumb to another set of distractions**

- **Acknowledge the real challenges of open offices and provide options for quiet spaces and remote work**

Your employees *want* to be focused, productive, and engaged. They just need supportive employers that set them up for success. Work with people on flexible solutions for eliminating distractions and, where that's not realistic, help them master the art of performing despite distractions.

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The survey was conducted online by Toluna Group on behalf of Udemy in February 2018 among 1,000+ U.S. office workers in full-time jobs who are ages 18 or older. Complete survey methodology available upon request.

About Udemy for Business

Udemy for Business is a curated learning platform that helps enterprises upskill their workforce and foster a culture of learning. The platform has 2,400+ high-quality courses taught by the world's leading experts and covering a wide range of topics, from programming and design to leadership and stress management.

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