

## How to manage your availability

by Odette Pollar - about the author - Odette Pollar is the author of 365 WAYS TO SIMPLIFY YOUR WORK LIFE

**HAVE YOU EVER FELT** that you would hurl something at the sight of the next smiling face asking for a moment of your time?

Managing your available time and reducing interruptions is no longer an option. Your work, not to mention your sanity, is at stake.

Here are six steps to manage your availability:

**1. Set the tone of the conversation.** Subtle cues often carry more weight than the spoken word. When people come to your desk do you sit back and basically do the equivalent of put your feet up? Do you ask the fatal question, "What's up?" Instead of "What's new?", try "How may I help you?", "What can I do for you?" or "Is there something you need?".

Initially, keep your pen poised, fingers on the calculator or phone in hand. A pleasant yet crisp tone of voice goes a long way to relay a message of business first, socialising later.

**2. State your time constraints.** If you have only a few minutes or if you are busy, say so. "I am very busy right now, can we talk later?" Let them make the choice of you later or someone else now.

**3. Steer the conversation.** Beware of visitors with compound agendas. They ostensibly come to discuss the purchasing order problem, but once that has been taken care of, you discover that the mail room is still mixing up deliveries.

Try a list-making strategy with multi-purpose talkers: taking brief notes forces them to be clear and specific while it allows you to get agreement on which issues will be discussed. If writing's not your style, ask them to choose the most critical issue and work that one to conclusion. Table the others for later.

**4. Beware the leaping monkey.** In your zeal to get back to your interrupted work, be cautious about accepting extra duties. For example, your offer to "look into it," may make your visitor happy – but it does produce a new project for you. Was it necessary for you to take on this extra work? Recognize the difference between a request for you to oversee work and a request for you to actually do the work.

**5. Take charge.** Just because you are in the office does not automatically mean that you are available. Schedule appointments as much as possible, and that includes telephone appointments. Setting a specific time for call backs allows you and the caller to be prepared and cuts down on phone tag.

**6. Happy endings. Closing statements** should not be abrupt, condescending or patronizing. Use a firm but courteous ending statement:  
"If that is all, I will get started on mis right away."

Cueing the person that time is running out is a graceful way to signal the end. For example, "Before we finish...", "Before we wrap it up...", "I see that our time is almost up, is there anything else?" – all of these let the person feel at ease, that your attention is still with them, but that stopping would be appreciated. Remember that your time as well as theirs is a valuable resource.