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Sshh: men at work

Intel's Quiet Time pilot bans phone calls, visits, and email in the office

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When Sir Isaac Newton discovered the law of gravity, he wasn't fiddling with a BlackBerry; he was reclined against an apple tree in quiet contemplation, or so the story goes. For today's scientist, as for any office worker, with colleagues, endless meetings and an overflowing inbox, such uninterrupted moments are rare. What does the lost time mean for creative thought? Computer giant Intel is studying this question: in a six-month pilot project dubbed "Quiet Time," workers shut out all distractions and wait for the proverbial apple to fall.

Quiet Time, which began in September, happens each Tuesday at two of Intel's U.S. sites (they won't reveal exactly where). From 8 a.m. to noon, the 300 engineers and managers in the test group set email and instant messaging to off-line mode, forward all calls to voice mail, and hang "do not disturb" signs at their cubicle entrances. They're then free to do "thinking work," says Intel IT principal engineer Nathan Zeldes, the man behind the project. "These guys are designing products, so I would hope they'd devote it to that," he says. "Although I'm sure some of them are tempted to clean out their inboxes."

No doubt they are. Information overload was a main concern behind the implementation of Quiet Time. "Today's rapid flow and exchange of information, and the consequent tasks they impose, are overwhelming," notes a report co-authored by Zeldes. "The barrage of communication exacts a toll on [workers'] productivity, as well as on their personal well-being." It also costs a typical knowledge-intensive company of 50,000 employees an estimated US\$1 billion each year, the report says. Intel employees receive about 350 emails a week (a third of which they deem unnecessary), and spend 20 hours managing them. They're not the only ones suffering. Around the world, roughly 196 billion emails were sent and received daily in 2007 — up from 5.1 billion in 2001. A recent study from the Universities of Glasgow and Paisley found that office workers check their email up to 40 times an hour, which is why a number of businesses — including Intel — are already experimenting with "No Email Day" initiatives.

Quiet Time-style initiatives go further. Today's knowledge workers can expect just three minutes of uninterrupted work on any given task, suggests research from Gloria Mark and Victor M. González at the University of California, Irvine. "It's bad for innovation," Mark says. "To be able to think very deeply, you do need quiet time." That's the idea behind "Administration Free Thursday," observed by 30 researchers at the University of Cambridge's Centre for Quantum Computation for the past three years. AFT, as it's called, "means no grant proposals, no fellowship applications, no reports, no booking of speakers or claiming of expenses. We just do physics," the project website explains.

Not only does constant interruption cause anxiety and fatigue — the Scottish study found 34 per cent of workers felt stressed by the sheer number of emails they received — it can sap creativity. One Harvard University report concluded that most people are 45 per cent less likely to think creatively on high-pressure days. "When creativity is under the gun, it usually gets killed," the study says. Information overload is literally driving some to distraction. Office workers increasingly show signs of "culturally induced attention deficit disorder," says Dr. Edward Hallowell, an ADD expert. "When you get overloaded, you become restless, distracted, irritable," he explains. But unlike true ADD, this is environmentally dependent: "If you sent these people to a quiet farm in Vermont, the symptoms would disappear." Hallowell has coined a term for this workplace affliction — attention deficit trait.

Although Quiet Time's subjects are temporarily cut off from email and other distractions, Intel can't stop them from interrupting themselves. Mark notes only about half of all workplace interruptions are external — the rest of the time, people break off from what they're doing for no ostensible reason. "There's a restlessness that wasn't there in Newton's day," says Zeldes.

Maybe that's one reason Quiet Time hasn't been unanimously popular, though Zeldes says "the ones who like it outnumber the ones who don't." He hopes its lessons can eventually be implemented company-wide — and has fielded questions on his research from everyone from the U.S. Army to the Salvation Army. "We're still learning how to manage technology," says Hallowell. "At first, it was managing us."