Distractions and Interruptions Tied to Errors in the Workplace

Jan. 10 HealthDay News

Even short interruptions -- such as glancing at a text message -- can cause people to make mistakes while performing a task, a new study finds.

Researchers asked 300 people to complete a sequence-based procedure on a computer and found that interruptions of about three seconds doubled the error rate, according to the study, which was published Jan. 7 in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

The Michigan State University researchers were surprised to find that such short interruptions had a major effect. The interruptions were so brief that the time it took to deal with them likely wasn't the cause of the increase in errors.

"So why did the error rate go up? The answer is that the participants had to shift their attention from one task to another," lead researcher Erik Altmann, associate professor of psychology, said in a university news release. "Even momentary interruptions can seem jarring when they occur during a process that takes considerable thought."

Brief interruptions -- such as reading an email or having colleagues poke their head in the door -- are common in workplaces, the researchers noted.

They added that the potential errors caused by such momentary distractions can be disastrous for people in certain professions, such as emergency room doctors or aircraft mechanics.

These findings suggest "that our health and safety is, on some level, contingent on whether the people looking after it have been interrupted," Altmann said.

One potential solution is to provide these professionals with work environments where they are protected against interruptions, the researchers said.