

Ep - 11 Transcript - interrupting

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SPEAKERS

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The Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast, episode 11. So you're someone who loves to focus on what is important in each moment. In fact, there may be few things more cherished than being in the flow state when you're getting your best work done. As it's happening, time flies by, and sometimes you even feel euphoric, proud of what you're accomplishing. But too much of a good thing is never good. And if you have ever missed a midday meal, because you're engrossed in your work, you may know that sometimes, you need a reminder or an interruption at just the right moment. They're helpful. They keep you on track, and they prevent you from making mistakes. But how do you program these interruptions or reminders into your life? In this solo episode, I'll be sharing my thinking about this particular problem, and what needs to be invented for us to get some permanent relief. Welcome to the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast.

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Welcome back, so let's start with a story. Ivan has a terrible problem. He's a creative graphics designer who must tap into a deep place to come up with his best ideas. Sometimes that might mean working for 12 hours straight... without eating... without going to the restroom. And even without stretching his back by taking a simple walk or a stroll around the office. But it's not just a momentary problem. On a big project, he'll forget to pay bills for weeks at a time. He'll stop spending enough time with his kids to support his family emotionally, and he'll quit his exercise program. While the results of his work are gratifying, and his professional achievements are many, he wishes he could be more balanced when he's doing his best work. Too many balls are being dropped, including a not so funny incident when he accidentally left his eight year old kid at the park until it was dark while he was working on a deadline.

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Frankly, he's scared that if he messes with a good thing, the quality of his output will suffer. So he's reluctant to tinker too much. But there shouldn't be a way he thinks to be an accomplished professional, who executes his practical responsibilities with some degree of basic skill. So if this story resonates -- Have you ever found yourself in a similar dilemma like an Ivan either on the micro level where you're working on a particular task, you enter the flow state, you have given it your total concentration, time is flying, you're doing your best work, you're really thrilled to be using your best capabilities, your best skills on something that's really challenging. So there's a good balance between challenge and the difficulty of the task and the skills that you have. Only to realize that six o'clock that you've mixed breakfast and lunch, or that there was an important meeting, that reminder came up, but you this state, and you are back to work. Somehow, you really enjoyed it so much, and you accomplished so much. But at the same time, something else went to heck, on the macro level.

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And on the macro level. A month, two months, you're deeply involved in some long term project. And when the project was finished, all of a sudden, you had five extra pounds, you don't know where they came from. Or your kid graduated, and you don't even know what happened. In the meantime, do you go to the graduation...an extreme case. But both of these situations if you if they resonate with you any at all, both of them come from the same place, they come from a failure to interrupt yourself effectively, we usually refer to it as a failure to remind yourself to do something, because we're brought up to try to use our memory to interrupt ourselves. It's called prospective memory. That's the psychologists' psychological name for it. But we tend to think of interruptions of this nature to come from the mind, which is why we use the word remind ourselves.

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But more broadly speaking, it's really a failure to make an interruption happen at the right moment, a failure of prospective memory. So let's say that's what we're trying to overcome this tendency within ourselves, to not remind ourselves, which is a part of not interrupting ourselves. So the way we say to people is that we forgot. So we talked about forgetting, we talked about the use of memory. And we're in the middle of something, and it was important. And we somehow skipped over the fact that this interruption was important. And unfortunately, you know, most of us would like to effectively interrupt ourselves. But as we look at our ecosystem, the tools that we have to work with, whether they're on our PC, a laptop, or they're on a phone, or some people have watches, the combination of dials or a tablet, the combination of all of them, has created a bit of a mess. Even on a closed ecosystem, like Apples, for example, the way they work together is haphazard. It doesn't jive. Some notifications work all the time, some don't work. They work, some of the time, they're not in sync. There are a number of things they don't do, but they don't produce the result we want, which is to get the exact and precise interruptions that we need to either interrupt the micro flow state or interrupt some longer project that we're working on.

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And if you're someone who has struggled to get your notifications to work, you may know what I'm talking about. Or if you're someone who's just turned them all off, you probably know what I'm talking about. And if you're someone who's gotten them to work, you know, to you. Unfortunately, I've noticed that whenever Windows doesn't update or Android doesn't update, all of my careful settings, go to heck on the app that I was relying on stop working. So the net effect is the same. A failure to interrupt myself effectively or a failure to build an ecosystem. That does it for me. Most of us can't afford to have an administrative assistant or a remote admin.

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...Someone who is working for us a remote assistant to do this kind of thing for us. We don't have a secretary. We don't have... if you've watched the West Wing, we don't have a Mrs. Landingham to tap on our shoulder if we're the president of the United States and say "Sir, your next meeting is supposed to start in five minutes" or "You need to leave for the summit within half an hour", or "You told me to remind you when it's time to go and have dinner in the residence". That Mrs. Landingham, was the interrupter.

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And you know, in the movie, she plays the role of a perfect person in terms of her ability to do this. Now, when we're on the receiving end of this, it's, it's, it's at least annoying, irritating, as sometimes a feeling of upset when we're in the moment and realize that we miss something that was important and we needed to be interrupted, in order to accomplish it. That could be a sense of panic, because now we have to scramble to do something, make something work, make something fit. And in that moment, we realized that we missed the interruption or the interruption failed, we are out of the flow state.

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Once we get out of the flow state, studies show it takes us 25 minutes to get back in or if we tried to stay in the flow state, because we have to get the job done. We get the job done very badly, because it's not very good quality flow state, probably not flowing at all at that point.

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Other people around us, when they see that we get engrossed like this, they think that we are absent minded, you know, like Mr. Magoo, or some kind of professor who gets lost and can't do basic things. The rest of the world is able to process these interruptions and to work effectively, but we get lost, and we're not effective. And people notice, and they make jokes about us. And they say that we can't trust us ... with our heads in the clouds, or we're artists, what do you expect, he's been in front of the easel for the last 48 hours? And people sometimes just make accommodations for us. But it's not the good kind of accommodation, it's the kind where they shake their heads, kind of roll their eyes and say, he is...or she is just not not, you know, he's this kind of person, and he's that kind of person.

12:04

But, you know, deep down, we really want to be high achievers, which is why we care. It's why you're listening to this podcast. You want to accomplish sound and good things in all parts of your life. You don't want to leave any of them out right?

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You want to be good at your art or your programming or your writing or whatever you use the flow state for...And you want to be good at managing interruptions. You want to be good at meeting the needs of your family, you want to be good at remembering to pick up the kids, you don't want to be someone who is flaky, you want to be reliable, not just because you want to be seen as reliable, because you want to be reliable in and of itself. It's an intrinsic want...an intrinsic goal that you have for you.

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You want to be someone who takes care of business and you want to be someone who does your best work. So you're thinking there's got to be a way there ought to be a way there should be a way to do both... to be effective in doing awesome work. And at the same time taking care of the practical needs of life.

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Because the truth is, if you don't become good at this, if you don't find a way to solve this problem, the practical side of life will eventually erode the quality of life and even your ability to get into the flow state. Because you know you can't stay in the flow state for so long if you don't eat. The body requires certain....you must drink water, your body requires certain basics. And if you try to persist in the flow state without eating and drinking, for example, resting at some point it will only destroy the quality of the flow state. So there's only so far you can go without there being some negative feedback.

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Also ...you know you got to pay the rent, right? If you're someone who's a creative and you need to build, you need to invoice or you need to ship, you know, do the boring side of the work. If you don't do the boring side of the business very well you won't have a business! You won't earn the right to go into the flow state and do your best work and be as creative as you want to be. You won't be like our protagonist who you know he/Ivan was a graphic designer and he wanted to keep doing his best work.

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When you've got to create an environment / a business that allows you to do that... and if you don't care take care of these seemingly mundane non creative activities. If you don't find a way to interrupt yourself to get them done on a regular and managed level, you won't have a business and you lose the

yourself to get them done on a macro and macro level, you won't have a business and you lose the lose the ability to go into the flow state. You could take a job like flipping burgers, right?

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When we realize we have the problem... what we try to do is, you know, try harder to remember. I'm not sure how we do that, but we try to, with determination. We may ask someone who's not reliable, you know, ask a spouse or kids or friend: "Do me a favor, remind me when so and so and so and so."

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They might not be the right person, might not be a Mrs. Landingham and they did make a mistake. And they do their life. And they're like, "Oh, you want me to remind you...I can barely remember to brush my own teeth!" Let alone remind you.!

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... not a good solution. Some of us, as I mentioned before, we turn off all our notifications. Or you try and turn all of them on. And then you have overload. Neither situation is ideal. Or we go out of pocket and we pay for someone who is reliable, which is expensive. I read a McKinsey report that said that most companies have cut back on their admin support for executives to cut the cost. Even though studies show that they help executives to be more productive. In other words, they're not really looking at cost benefit, the cost benefit trade off, they're really just trying to cut the cost.

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So the reason this problem kind of exists and keeps going and eventually infects us, as human beings is that we suffer from something called the Zeigarnik effect. And that's what happens when you for example, make a promise to interrupt yourself at two o'clock to have lunch. One of two things happens. One is that you either forget. Or your mind devotes 5% 10% of your capacity to reminding you at two o'clock. So there are a bunch of studies that show that when you do that your your attention drifts to the clock, the closer you get to the time. So you're losing some of the flow state. Also the the Zeigarnik Effect, which is this ping of your mind, by your subconscious to remind you, "Two o'clock, don't forget lunch, make sure...make sure!!"... that eventually leads to a feeling of overwhelm.

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Because your mind, your subconscious mind doesn't trust your conscious mind. It believes that you need to be pinged or reminded. So the Zeigarnik Effect can take you over, so by the time you get to five minutes to two, the flow status is lost. All you're doing is watching the clock. And all you're doing is to get watching the hands tick down.

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So why does this problem (if we know that it exists), why is it so such a hard one for us to overcome? Well, there's of course, the cost of hiring someone reliable that I mentioned that. There is a lack of proper software and tools that I mentioned before. There's the willpower that we think we need to overcome the problem. But the truth is that willpower isn't what's needed...it's skill. More willpower, according to Roy Baumeister, which is what we like to rely on, doesn't get us to where we want to get. Willpower is a depletable asset. And we think it will get it to us all I need to do is to be more determined. You know, when you're telling your friends, you just need to make up your mind to do it. We say things that imply that your problem is lack of willpower. Well, his research said it's not true.

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Perhaps more pertinent. And what we'll be looking at is that we just don't understand the problem. It's not a matter of willpower or commitment. It is a matter have the tools but the tools don't exist. But the truth is, the lack of proper tools comes from a shallow understanding of what we really need. When we ask ourselves to remind ourselves, we don't know what's really going on. Which is why we use the words remind and remember so often, instead of the word "interrupt".

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So I say this might be important to you if doing your best work on a regular basis, having time in the week....setting time in the week to do your best work... is an important part of your week. Arguably it's THE most important part of your week. It's probably the reason you are hired by someone, or you get hired by people is to do your best work. And if your best work comes from these moments, then these moments are the ones that are, you might say, the absolute most important times of the week. Those are the ones that are the hardest to access. But they're the most precious. They're the most leveraged, they're the ones that (if you're thinking Pareto effect) they're the 20% of the time that produces 80% of the quality and the volume and the work that you do. So it makes sense to, for us to have focus on what it is that's happening, so that we can understand what kind of solutions are needed. Because if we could, if we could actually get to some solutions, in this conversation, this discussion, maybe your best work could even become even better. Maybe you're leaving money on the table, maybe your inability to self interrupt is actually costing you some output volume wise, quality wise, maybe you're having to go back and fix problems and spend extra time doing that you wouldn't ordinarily have to do.

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Maybe there's a way to to if you're doing work for other people, for your customers internal and external, that you could increase their satisfaction if you were able to solve this problem of increasing the quality of your work by managing your interruptions.

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So I'm going to assume that you're you've listened this far. You're someone who wants solutions, you're not just listening for the for the heck of it. And you're someone who is willing to make some changes in order to produce that result. So let's move forward with that assumption.

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So I've tried a number of tactics to self interrupt myself, and I've become a lot better than I used to be. But there was a time when I was writing my book, for example, when I would resort to starting my time in front of my keyboard, I would start writing at 330 in the morning, so I would go to bed early and simply wake up early. And as we as I woke up a bit long before anybody else, there were a few interruptions by definition because everyone was sleeping. So it's not a real solution, in the sense that it happened in the middle of a day, but it's a tactic that I use in order to get by.

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And I keep tinkering with different ways to remind myself and I'm going to share some of them with you. Some of them come from my book perfect time based productivity where there's an entire skill called Interrupting. So, first part of our talk today had to do with defining the problem, let's now move into solutions. And I defined Interrupting as basically what we've been calling serve interrupting the skill of creating the right kinds of interruptions for yourself. So that you can interrupt yourself, stop yourself, come out of the flow state, at the macro level, or come out of the project at the macro level, in order to come up a level and ask yourself, "Okay, standing outside the flow state, what do I do next?"

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So let's call it a skill. And I broke that skill down in my book into three areas, three sub skills. And if you followed my work, any at all or you read the book, or have done my programs, (NewHabits, or Rapid Assessment Program,) you probably know that I've broken it down into three sub skills.

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And first one is to outsource the task of stopping yourself to an external mechanism. So an external mechanism is one that requires no management by you. In other words, none of your brain power in other words, keeps you free of the Zeigarnik Effect, because your mind is not involved at all. And I've mentioned a few...Other people. A Device. Software, an app. A plain old alarm clock would be a device as a form of interrupting your sleep, self interruption. And it's probably others, I just haven't really thought of all of them yet. But the idea is to make it make the interruption independent of your attention. When you do so you leave yourself free to tap into your entire capability, creative attention, and creative ability 100%. And as you do so, over and over again, you become more and more capable more and more able to tap into more, you're able to grow as a creative person. That's the first.

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The second skill has to do with setting up auto reminders so that when you're in the middle of flowing, so before you enter the flow state, you say "Okay, I'm not just going to enter it and go for the next 12 hours until I can't even think anymore, and I have to crawl into bed and rest for another 12." No, you actually have a plan and you say, "Okay, I'm going to spend the next five hours. After the first

hour, I'm going to get up and walk for about 5-10 minutes outside in nature, then I'm gonna come back in and continue." Or "I'm going to set Pomodoro hours for example, which allow me to take a five minute break every half an hour, approximately, and then at the end of four Pomodoro is I take a half an hour break"... whatever the formula is that you prefer. But you have a plan that's set up for you to manage your time while you're in the flow state, you get different resources that are ready to you, you get food, you get drink, you figure out where the bathroom is, so you shouldn't have to go searching. If you're in an unfamiliar location, you tell people around you, you that you're going to be in the flow state, please don't interrupt me, you drink your coffee, if you need that kind of that kind of support. You make sure that your calendar is set up, you block the time in your calendar and nothing else needs to be done during that time.

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And the combination of all these activities allows you to enter into the flow state completely. And it includes the Interrupting activities that some of those are I mentioned are interrupting for interruptions for self interruptions.

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And then the third skill is what do you do when you run over? So you get to the end of a.... all of a sudden you realize that oh my goodness, I am over the time I've not five and a half hours. So how do you relate to that? And in the book I talked about relating to that as a defect, error or a mistake And you know, defects are there to be eliminated.

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So, at a future time you think about it "Why did I go over? What didn't work?" And as you become very, very skilled, you will never go over. Not unconsciously. You could consciously go what you would have run over unconsciously, you would know what you were doing.

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So the interruptions would allow you to completely enter into the flow state, completely enter into that time of intense work, when you're doing that project, the rest of your life is being taken care of so that you can be in the flow state. You wouldn't get interrupted by other kinds of disruptions that happen sort of by accident. But the disruptions, if you're skillful, would be ones that tell you exactly what to do.

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So for example, you might set an alarm on your device, phone, computer, app, watch, whatever. To take that break to go walking. To get up drink some water, use the bathroom, so that you can come back fresh. So it's not just one unconscious flow state that you're very conscious about what you're

doing and what you're entering into what you're going to do next, there's a bit of a, a mental and physical break. I am actually going through the list of, of skills that you need to be in the flow state. So you can get in it effectively and stay in it for as long as you want.

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And by the way, flow is also a skill that's outlined in my book Perfect Time-Based Productivity. It has a host of skills... about 13-14 different sub skills that relate to just "Flowing", which is the skill that's mentioned in my book. But anyway, back to back to Interrupting. So when you understand how the flow state works, it's not a leap, to then start to develop your skill at Interrupting, if it has to do with the flow state.

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But how about, everyday reminders, like to remind yourself to pay a bill or remind yourself to get on a phone call. Or remind yourself to start exercising, or remind yourself to take a break. So I mentioned those four, because those are very different kinds of interruptions. Unfortunately, I've not found software that does what I'm about to describe, but I wish it did, which is to offer you escalating kind of interruptions.

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An escalator, where you have everywhere from a mild interruption to a strong interruption. So what I mean by mild a strong, strong interruption, for example would occur, when you're waking up in the morning, you're dead asleep, you've created the self interruption, and it needs to be strong enough to pull you out to the deepest sleep. So if you're a heavy sleeper, some people will put two alarms, one mechanical, one electronic, just in case. But the point is that the combination of the two will pull you out of your sleep...it's a strong, strong interrupter. If you're going to have a meeting at let's say, four o'clock later in the day, you have a bunch of other stuff that you're doing, you're focused on doing these things. And

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you're not relying hopefully on memory at all to tell you that you have this four o'clock meeting. So what could come in here is first a mild alarm. And then when four o'clock combs a strong alarm. So that if for example, and this happens to me on weekends in particular, and happened to me this past weekend, I had a seven o'clock 7pm appointment on Sunday, the only appointment for the whole day. Now Sundays for me start off by riding my bicycle in the morning, taking a very long nap and then doing some work that I find to be fun.

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It's not sitting in front of the computer managing a whole bunch of different tasks. And the problem is that I don't consult my calendar in the way that I do when I'm on a, you know, on a regular weekday. So my system isn't flawless. I have to consult the calendar few times because I'm using some

memory even though I do use the interrupters, but they don't behave the way want them to all the time. I don't know why.

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The apps that I've tried sometimes work and sometimes don't...it's very haphazard, unfortunately. But what I would want that reminder to do for me is give me a mild one first and then a strong one, just before the meeting starts at four, so that if I'm away from my phone, the way I was on Sunday, I wouldn't have to rely on my phone being with me. In that moment, in order to make sure I don't miss the meetin.

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What it should do is start making a strong alarm, like it's gonna wake me up from deep sleep. So wherever I am in the house, I can hear the alarm and say "What's that" Oooh... I have this meeting at seven o'clock!" So I've gotten around that to some degree by creating a wake up using the alarm clock to remind me of weekend events. It's not a great solution, it's not integrated with my calendar is not integrated with my pest management software. It's really this additional kind of alarm. But you can see what I'm trying to do to make sure that wherever I am in the house that I get the alarm, and that my phone will be somewhere in the house. And even if it's in a different room, I can still hear.

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Some people have accomplished the same thing using a watch, a smartwatch, but can't speak to the efficacy of them. But I did hear from one of my colleagues that just the other day he had his smartwatch set, and then the battery ran down. And that was that. So a smart, smart system and ecosystem will realize that your primary way of being interrupted is no longer isn't working, you have not aknowledged the remainder. And then it would escalate once again, to stronger and stronger reminders, stronger and stronger interrupters, so that in the end of this alarm would go off, but you just couldn't couldn't avoid.

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I've also used a countdown timer. A Countdown Timer is really effective for entering the flow state. I've used the one that has a it has, it's a little bit difficult to explain, especially if you're not seeing me. But it starts off with a full pie chart at the top of an hour. And as the hour is consumed, the pie chart gets smaller and smaller until there's only a slice left and then it the alarm goes off at the end of the hour. So it starts off full red and then in the shape of a pie gets smaller and smaller, smaller and smaller paycheck. So you can watch it, you know, the one I have is on a phone that I have, and I have it sometimes in front of me. And you can watch your progress. In a way just by glancing at it you can tell how much of the hour you have left to accomplish this item in the flow state. I found that really, really effective. It's purpose is narrow, it's a little bit like a using an egg timer in a way except it doesn't have any noise. The numbers on an egg timer are typically too fine. Too small, you'd have to actually stop what you're doing to read the numbers, see where you are. This gives you a visual at a

glance, a good idea in this web software that actually I'll put the link to the software in the show notes. But it has some software you can download for free that helps you that does exactly what I'm describing.

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And then there are apps. So unfortunately, the apps, as I said are haphazard, not found one that's consistent. And here's the problem why. I think the designers of

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reminders tend to be a part or tend to be a part of the team that puts task management and calendar software together. So they're working on just one feature inside of a larger app or larger piece of software.

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In other words, they're not experts in Interrupting. So I've tried to find experts who develop software in apps in interrupting or self interrupting. And I've not really been able to find them. And I say they're not experts, because they have not studied the needs that I'm talking about in this podcast. They have not gotten to that level of depth so they don't really understand what someone who cares that much about product their productivity requires to do their best work either micro or macro.

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So I stay waiting. And I'm hoping that, you know as a result of doing this podcast, if you know someone who's a developer who's looking for a good idea, this is one because the perfect interrupter would replace the Mrs Landingham; they will replace your memory They would be flawless, they would exist coexist on multiple platforms at the very same time, they will behave in concert, they will have some of these escalating features that I talked about. They would work like a partner for you.

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And they'd help you to do be effective and do your best work and avoid that frustration I talked about at the top of the show. To do that, they need to understand the flow state. And they will need to understand where this is coming from. So there are some distinctions and principles they would need to bring.

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Until that software comes, we need to be the ones. Because I'm here to say, this may not be a problem for a 12 year old who has one or two time demands, and keeps them in her memory, his memory, because the number of time demands that they're trying to manage on a daily basis is really small.

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But as you make progress from being a 12 year old, with to time demands per day, to being an adult, with hundreds of time demands, (a time demand is a task by the way, it's the kind of task). Then, as you get to that level, this problem will/ must become a problem must become an issue. And you must find a way to progressively resolve it.

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The bad news I have today is that it's not like you flick a switch and you solve it, it's more like you're gaining different levels of mastery. My experience is that you're able to go back and forth, you make two steps forward and then three steps back. It has this kind of very uneven quality where it's difficult to make progress.

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But I'm here to say that if you're committed to manage lots of tasks, then your discretionary time is going to be short... the opportunity for error is going to be shrinking as it's going to be getting smaller and smaller. You need to be effective in every moment of the day. And to do so you're going to need to be great at self interrupting.

42:12

Okay, so I'd love to hear from you. If you have any questions or comments, just check out the show notes below. Any feedback you have on this episode? And keep listening...I want to tell you about some of some of the things that are coming up here at the Task Management and Time Blocking podcast, and in particular, our next episode. Coming up in just a few seconds.