

## Coaching Tips from Dr. Lois Frankel - July 2008

Chances are if you were at your desk when this e-mail came through you stopped what you were doing long enough to see who it was from. A recent BusinessWeek article indicates that distractions such as e-mails, noise, phones, and drop-ins consume an average of 28% of the American workday. When you take into consideration the time spent on the distraction and the time it takes to re-focus, it costs U.S. businesses \$650 billion annually in lost productivity. Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at UC Irvine, conducted studies documenting that most of us switch gears every few minutes and that it can take up to thirty minutes to get back on track.

You're never going to eliminate distractions (author Gary Marcus says human beings are wired to be distracted because we have to be alert to change), but here are some tips for how you can remain more focused whether you work in a private office, a cubicle, or an open floor plan:

- \* Pick up a white noise machine. I have one in my own office and it subtly drowns out voices from other offices. A desktop waterfall or machine that plays soothing sounds like rain, the ocean, or birds can do the same.
- \* If you have a door, close it when trying to meet deadlines. Although I'm an advocate for keeping the door open as much as possible, there are those times when it's simply necessary to have it closed for a while. Try making a humorous sign or find an appropriate cartoon to place on the door for those times when a closed door is the only thing that will help you maintain you sanity.
- \* Shut off your e-mail notification. If you're an e-mail junkie it's too tempting to divert your attention when you hear new mail arrive. And if you truly are addicted to e-mail, no excuses. You can do it!
- \* Establish office rules of etiquette. Whether you're the boss or a team member, bring up distractions as a costly business issue to address (you might even forward this e-mail with this paragraph highlighted). Be prepared to make a few suggestions to kick off the discussion, such as take personal cell phone calls out of the office, always use your inside voice, no music that can be heard by others, and refrain from group discussions within earshot of a workspace.
- \* Buy an inexpensive pair of earplugs. I actually carry a pair around with me to use on planes, in places where people tend to scream instead of talk on cell phones, and even at home when I'm trying to write but there's a lot of commotion in the house. They work just as well in the office and, after you've worn them for a while, you just might find that you prefer the sound of your own breathing to the talking, wheezing, or laughter coming from the cubicle next door. You'll notice I don't suggest headphones or other devices that entirely block out noise. The idea isn't to become a recluse or isolated, but rather reduce unwanted distractions.