

# **Distractions in the office environment of start-up companies**

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>The rapid technological development along with the expansion of open-plan offices have turned the modern workplace into the place where productivity is constantly exposed, given high probability of distractions. Every year, leading world's economies lose billions because of distractions, and the tendency does not seem to stop in the near future. The objectives of this study were (a) to find various types of distractions, different distractions as such, and evaluate their impact on productivity in the office environment; and (b) to find the most common distractions that occur in start-up environments and the way they are treated.</p> <p>The mandatory theoretical base for qualitative research was obtained with secondary data. It included, but was not limited to, data about productivity, common distractions in the modern workplace, and various solutions used to deal with distractions. Afterwards, primary data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews, with the number of three companies altogether represented by total of six people. The interviewees represented different, yet suitable for the research companies, since research required representatives of start-up companies. Primary data collection was ended at the point where data saturation was reached.</p> <p>The results demonstrated the most common distractions that appear in the studied companies, the distractions that ahead of time were encountered in secondary data analysis. By the end of the study, the most common distractions for both big companies and start-ups were defined; the tendencies of their probability were outlined; and various techniques to cope with distractions were presented.</p>		
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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Context

Productivity. Productivity is what every manager demands from employees. People are paid for productivity. If the individual demonstrates low productivity at the workplace, it is a sign for his/her manager. However, sometimes productivity may go down because of certain things that take one's attention away from what one is doing or thinking about. (Hornby, 2000, 366) This is what distractions are.

Distractions occur in various environments and under various circumstances. For example, as it has been brought by AAA foundation for traffic safety, driver distraction is responsible for 58% of teen crashes in the studied cases. (Distraction and Teen Crashes: Even Worse than We Thought, 2015) The world is changing and we are getting more and more distractions to be influenced by. It has been becoming a substantial phenomenon in recent years. According to Nelson J, "We've never been more distracted at work." (2011) Even though distractions do not always carry something negative; for instance, if you are working on a project and all of a sudden your co-workers decide to interrupt you by felicitating your birthday, it is not a bad thing. Nevertheless, for distractions as such we can see in their nature that they take attention and pull it somewhere else. Individuals have to be aware of that, and they have to not let themselves get stuck with constant distractions occurring everywhere around. In the term itself distraction is painted as an issue for individual's productivity and ability to maintain his/her focus on the task that the one has set to perform in the given moment. Distractions, naturally, are an issue. Although, this study is not going to focus on distractions and their global influence. This paper will only observe and study distractions that occur at the workplace. Moreover, it is not going to include all types of workplaces. It is not going to include work taking place outside, specific outdoor locations, blue collar positions, telecommuting, and so on. The only location this study will focus on is office environment. Nonetheless, it is huge on its own, given the norms of modern workplace, common job positions, and activities companies want their workers to perform, all these factors lead to a rapid expenditure of white collar positions. In New York City alone, office jobs in 2017 accounted for 1.5 million of the city's

4.3 million jobs. (Conley, 2017) There are more and more workers who have to share the room, adding to that technological development, and a wide spread of open-office culture (more on that in chapter 2.2) and we get the kind of environment where distractions occur more often than ever before.

Except for establishing the overall perspective on distractions in office environment, the way this study focuses on key areas will lead it to start-up companies and primary data collection will be performed to study the particular attitude of those and their treatment of distractions. (More on that in chapter 1.4 Structure of the thesis and research process) Although, it is important to highlight that the study is not entirely dedicated to start-ups alone. Main topic is distractions in office environment, and afterwards, to take the gained knowledge deeper, start-up environments are going to be objectives for primary data collection and will be the ones that this entire paper would be most suitable to, except for the researcher himself and his personal knowledge base being extended.

## 1.2 Motivation for the research

The reason start-ups have been chosen for this study as the final point of what all knowledge shall be gained for is the following. By examining start-up companies at the early stage of their lifecycle and observing the common distractions they face, it may be possible to assist those companies to solve the problem (distractions decreasing productivity) at this stage and let positive changes occur now; and afterwards, turn the proper treatment of distractions into a habit, instead of turning the regular distraction itself into a habit a company gets at the early point. Especially, given the tendency of managerial practices to turn into a common thing within the company from early days and trace the company at following stages of development because of absorption of local norms by new incoming employees. This is the motivational part of this study to businesses. It is designed to have positive impact on young enterprises and improve their managerial practices. Along with that the industry is supposed to get a better overall level of proper practice among start-ups, which may improve general likeliness of young companies to build something valuable, which raises the bar in the business world. Moreover, the right treatment of distractions may help enterprises worldwide to improve their performance and

decrease the chances of making a mistake, which may end up having significant impact on the world as such and the living standards. Speaking of society and the world, and how this research may affect from this perspective. As mentioned, it is dedicated to have a positive impact on quality of work done: by studying phenomenon that has a tendency to have negative impact on the work, world gets to know more about the problem and therefore will be less likely to make the same mistake. This way, this study may have societal impact and by improving the quality of work and quality of offerings companies have, it may improve consumer choice and make it wider. Also, the better performance of start-up companies may lead more young beginners in the business world to succeed and therefore improve the wellbeing of small businesses in the given region, which is the key to creating more workplaces, bringing more financial resources to the government for improving wellbeing of its citizens, and overall growth of economy. (Brown, 2010)

Nevertheless, staying realistic, this paper is most likely not going to have direct impact on the global economy or tendencies that exist in the workplaces, since certain limitations exist for the influence this paper may end up having. However, the smaller the scale, the higher impact the study will have on something. Despite the fact that it will have relatively little impact on the economy directly, it is still going to have direct and large impact on researcher's knowledge, and value he may be able to present to the workforce is going to be higher after the study than before. It is going to provide researcher with the right knowledge, regarding the field he is interested in. The workforce needs managers who would be able to maintain productivity of their units on the corporately desired level. Since the researcher may end up at this position at some point of his future career, it is going to have very direct impact on how he is going to treat the unit, keep good productivity, and most importantly for this study, treat existing distractions in the given office environment.

### 1.3 Research objectives and research questions

The main questions this research is aiming towards answering:

1. What is the overall nature and impact of distractions in the modern office environment?

## 2. What common distractions occur in start-up companies?

These questions are going to be answered in the presented order and as the research progresses, due to amount of knowledge required to research each of those. As for the objectives this research will complete, those are:

1. To find various types of distractions, different distractions as such, and evaluate their impact on productivity in the office environment.
2. To find the most common distractions that occur in start-up environments and the way they are treated.

Both objectives are 'to find' something, which means that this study will mostly be descriptive and will have to deal a lot with data collection, both secondary and primary. Another important aspect is that the study does not have a normative question. Thus, the study is not dedicated to finding a new solution to deal with distractions, nor to evaluate various existing solutions and determine the ones that work best, this is not the aim of the research. The paper shall answer descriptive questions about the phenomenon and the field, after which it will gradually take a deeper perspective with a closer analysis of the phenomenon by observing start-ups.

### 1.4 Structure of the thesis and research process

The structure of the thesis and how the process will be going are presented in Figure 1.



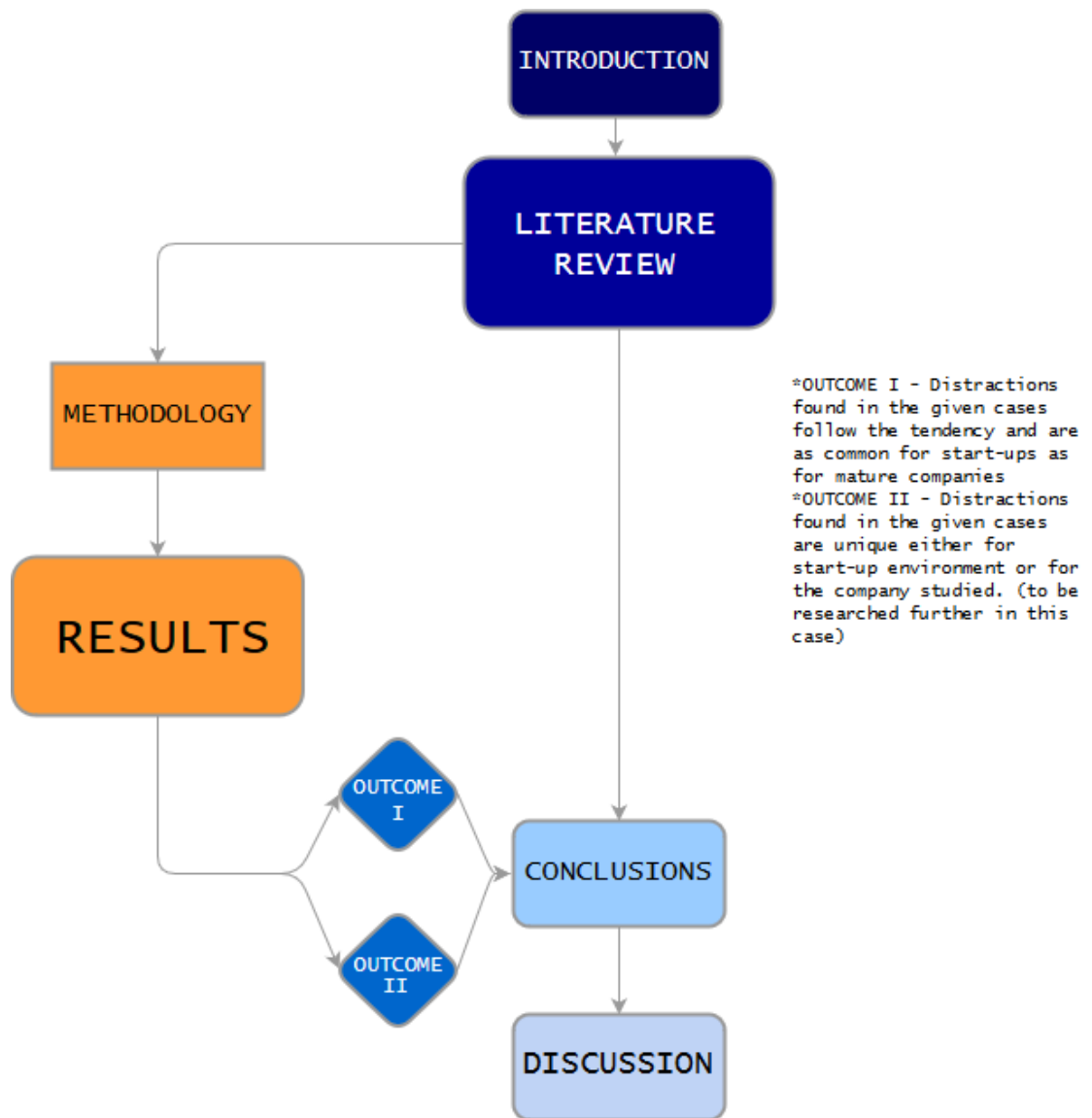


Figure 1. Research structure

The first chapter in the paper is Introduction. This part includes

- Introduction to the topic of the study,
- Motivation for different parties,
- Research objectives and questions, and
- Research structure and plan.

The second part is literature review. It is going to play a vital role in setting the basis for the further research that cannot be implemented without the basic knowledge gained in this chapter. It will include

- Analysis of productivity in the workplace as such,

- Distractions analyzed as a phenomenon in the office environment,
- Different types, particular actions and happenings seen as distractions; and
- Common solutions seen across the world to the regular daily distractions.

The methodology part is going to slide the study to the next step, leading to answering the second research question and moving the entire study in that direction. It will carry

- Description of research methods used for primary data collection,
- Structure of upcoming analysis of primary data, and
- Research ethics.

Results chapter has the name standing for itself. This is exactly what this part is going to be about. It will include description and analysis of the primarily collected data.

The conclusions part will include

- Author stating existence or absence of tendencies that may exist in the given environment, depending on outcomes of data collection;
- Summary of the whole phenomenon and its relevance.

Discussion chapter shall set a more diverse perspective on phenomenon and show it from various perspectives after data is collected. It will include

- Highlighting correlation or differences in distractions in established enterprises and start-ups, deriving from data collection;
- Setting ideas on how this knowledge can be used for future researchers.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Productivity**

Given the relatively narrow nature of the study it seems necessary to start from a more remote phenomenon and after that move closer to the distractions themselves. Therefore, productivity is to be defined.

According to Joseph Prokopenko (1987, 3), “productivity is the relationship between the output generated by a production or service system and the input provided to create this output,” as shown in Figure 2.

$$\frac{\text{Output}}{\text{Input}} = \text{Productivity}$$

Figure 2. Productivity formula (Prokopenko, 1987, 3)

The fewer resources we put in a certain activity, the more productive we become. As long as the outcome and its quality are on the desired level. Important to point out that when referring to quality it does not only mean quality of the output, but it takes the entire process as such and along with that also quality of workforce, its working conditions, quality of managerial activities, etc. At the same time, we should keep in mind that numerically there is more demanded from a productive employee depending on the time period and how developed the given field is. For example, a porter in a hotel 100 years ago would be able to carry fewer bags and it would take him/her more time to bring each bag to the room than it would now when there are elevators to help speed up the process and let the porter satisfy more residents that just arrived. In this case, we certainly would demand more bags carried from this porter now than we used to. It is also important to acknowledge that intensity of our resources usage does not stand for productivity. While productivity brings positive changes to the labour, a high intensity is just a temporal switch in amount of work done, which will give a very limited increase in productivity level, given the physical limitations people face. Productivity is improved by working smarter, not harder. (Prokopenko, 1987, 4)

Importance of productivity is much more than individual performance and the efficiency of a particular worker. Productivity has direct impact on the way businesses operate in the region. Therefore, it impacts gross domestic product per capita and it should lead to higher standards of living. (Prokopenko, 1987, 5) For example, for a while Organisation for economic co-operation and development has been showing us that the most productive countries with high average of GDP per hour worked are usually developed countries with strong economies and high living standards (Level of GDP per capita and productivity, 2017). Afterwards, for

simplification the same data was evaluated and placed in an article in TIME magazine (Johnson, 2017) with a table that simplifies the view on the data, which is utilized in Figure 3.

RANK	COUNTRY	GDP PER HOUR WORKED	EMPLOYED POPULATION	GDP (USD)	AVERAGE WORK WEEK (HRS)
1	Luxembourg	\$ 93.4	405,600	\$57b	29
2	Ireland	\$ 87.3	1,989,400	\$302b	33.5
3	Norway	\$ 81.3	2,753,000	\$318b	27.3
4	Belgium	\$ 69.7	4,601,200	\$498b	29.8
5	United States	\$ 68.3	151,000,000	\$18,037b	33.6
6	Denmark	\$ 67.6	2,829,000	\$270b	27.2
7	France	\$ 65.6	27,523,000	\$2,648b	28.2
8	Germany	\$ 65.5	43,057,000	\$3,857b	26.3
9	Netherlands	\$ 65.4	8,792,000	\$818b	27.4
10	Switzerland	\$ 64.2	4,962,600	\$506b	30.6

Figure 3. Most productive countries (Johnson, 2017)

Productivity is calculated by having each country's GDP divided by the hours all employed citizens have been working on average. (Johnson, 2017)

However, the sole factor of high productivity does not always relate to successful economic performance. For example, in APO productivity database (APO productivity databook, 2015, 62) Iran demonstrates impressive results in labour productivity level by per-worker GDP, shown in Figure 4.

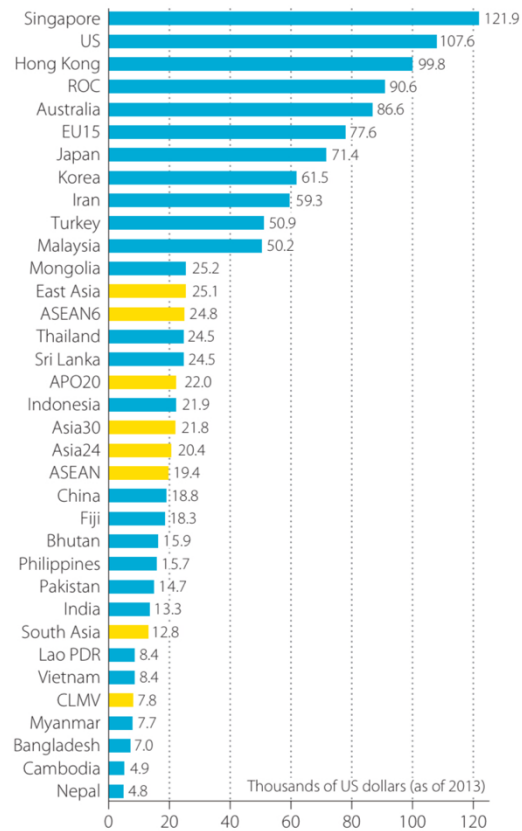


Figure 4. Labour productivity level by per-worker GDP (2015)

However, there is a concern regarding the value of it because the country has the lowest employment rate (Figure 5), which has also been discovered in the same study. (APO productivity databook, 2015, 33)

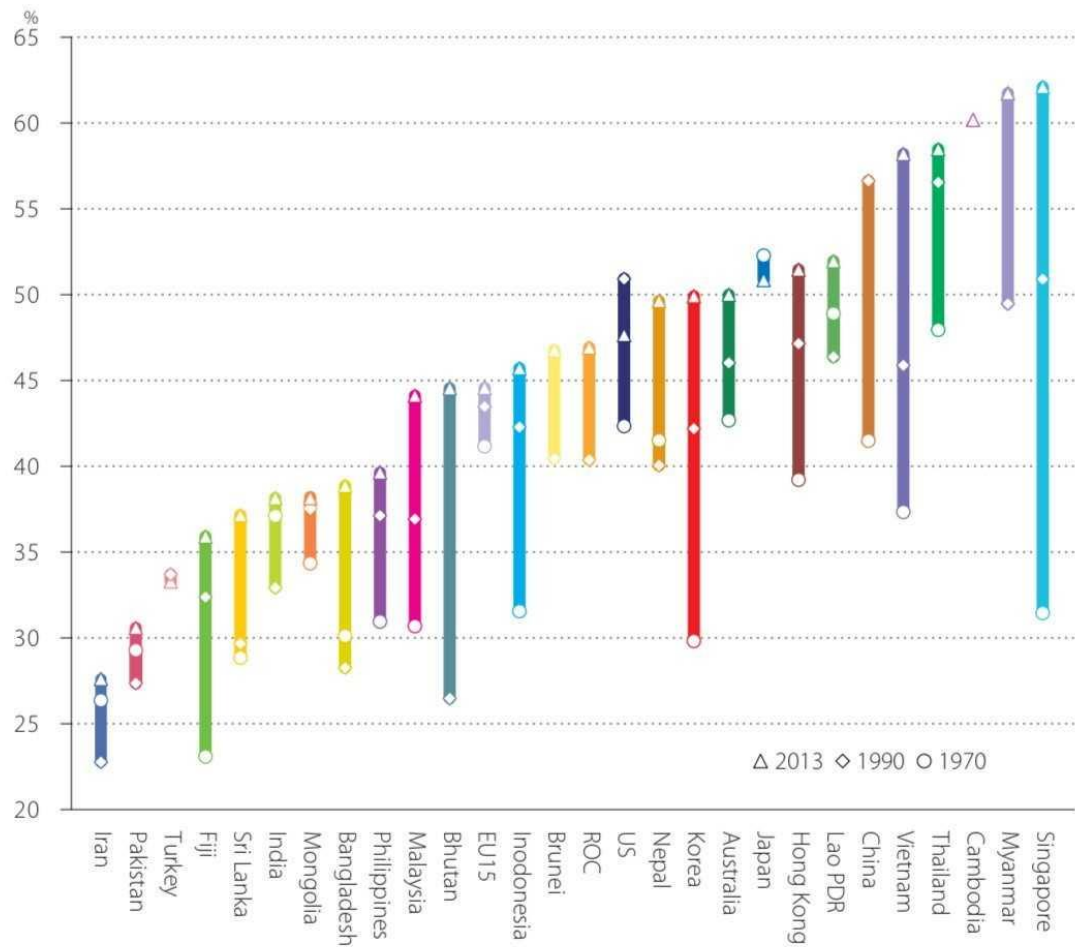


Figure 5. Employment rates, 1970, 1990, and 2013 (APO productivity databook, 2015, 33)

Meanwhile, high productivity is capable of boosting economy growth, its low level may slow down the growth of the businesses in the given region, and thus affect economy of the country. Prokopenko brings up an example of the Philippines (Prokopenko, 1987, 6). The country where from 1900 to 1960 the biggest part of increases in the total output of the country (97.7%) were because of increases in the extensive factors of production, thus a more active usage of resources. Whereas, only 2.3% of increases in the total output there were due to productivity. With this case we are able to see that the more extensive usage of resources does not pay off as much as high productivity would, and that companies might not want to focus as much on making more input, but instead improve productivity and develop their talents.

Speaking of low productivity, using the same model we can say that low productivity comes out of a case where big input does not meet desired outcome. Continuing

with the example of a porter in the hotel. In this case input would be the salary that the employer pays to him/her, resources that had been spent to train him/her, risk costs, employment costs, etc. The desired output is determined by employer. If the employer wants the porter to carry 20 bags per hour but the worker manages to only get 10, then the porter demonstrates low productivity.

Also, in the book Prokopenko has brought an interesting model of the low-productivity trap, which demonstrates how different factors and actions may affect the productivity and freeze development, Figure 6.

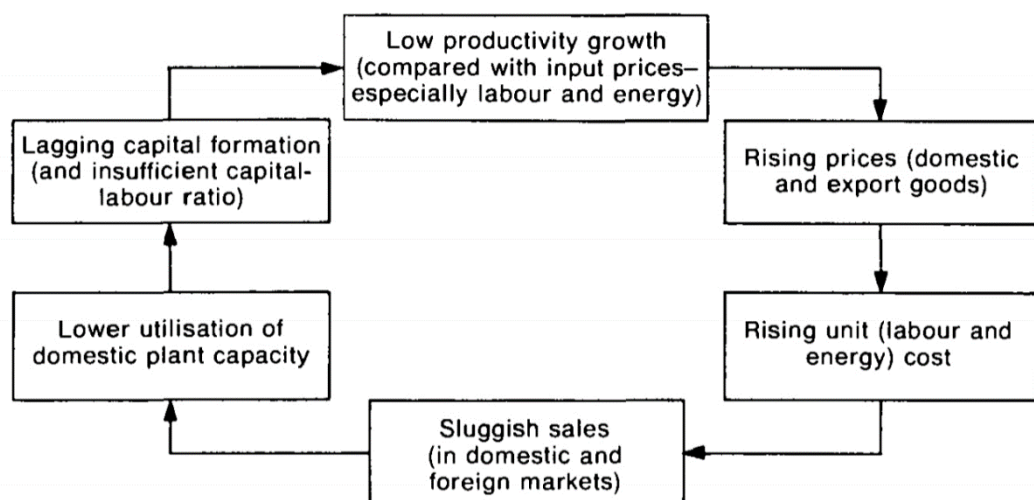


Figure 6. Low-productivity trap (Prokopenko, 1987, 7)

The only way to efficiently leave this trap of consistent losses and increases in prices is to increase the productivity. According to American Economic Review, (Bloom, Mahajan, McKenzie, and Roberts, 2010) the three factors that may lead to low productivity when used poorly are:

- Management practices,
- Financial constraints, and
- The delegation of decision making.

We cannot change the economy in the blink of an eye, the way market operates, and given the more managerial perspective this research is conducted from, it has been

decided to focus on managerial practices and see the phenomenon from this perspective.

## 2.2 Distractions

There are many factors that affect our productivity in both positive and negative ways. This would be hard to capture and evaluate all of them deep enough within one study. However, there is one certain aspect that has been affecting productivity for a long time, the one that this research will be dedicated to. These are distractions at the workplace. This is a very crucial aspect of our working life, since “3 in 4 employees say two or more hours a day are lost in productivity because employees are distracted”. (New CareerBuilder survey reveals how much smartphones are sapping productivity at work, 2016)

Distractions are a serious issue in the modern workplace. Our employees nowadays are more distracted than ever before. (Nelson, 2011) According to SurePayroll, “Each year, America’s vices, distractions, and health problems cost U.S. employers \$1.8 trillion in lost productivity”. (Schumacher, 2016) There are many things that are capable of taking away the employee’s attention, and with the rapidly growing number of distractors the ability of an individual to recover and return to the task remains on the same level. As stated by Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California, after an interruption, a regular office worker would need about 25 minutes to return to the original task. Moreover, on average it would only take about 11 minutes between each interruption of work. (Matter, 2013) Obviously, it does not mean that every time there would be a 25 minute gap of doing nothing, but what it does mean is that most employees get distracted and are affected by this a lot, which eventually impacts the productivity of the entire unit at large. Thus, there may be two solutions to this problem, it is either to

- Eliminate distractions, or
- Adapt to them.

As for adapting to distractions, to a certain extent it is a controversial phenomenon which has both advantages and disadvantages. Let’s look at adapting to distractions and embracing them in the example of social media distraction, which happens to be



one of primary sources of distraction. Microsoft has conducted a study and found that about 37% of respondents would do their job better with a wider use of social media. (Bennett, 2013) Along with other stats, the bottom line of the study was that social media may have positive impact on productivity and help employees perform better. (Bennett, 2013) However, another study shows that in reality most people do not go on social media at work to do something useful, instead between 60 to 80 percent of people go to social media at work just to “kill time”. (Boitnott, 2014) Furthermore, despite loses in productivity, some social networks that employees check are also going to make them less happy and have negative consequences on their mental health. (Macmillan, 2017) Thus, embracing distractions could be an option, if you are a company that needs its employees to work closely with that, which is oftentimes the case for a white collar workplace. However, cold facts show that in most cases it is pretty straightforward: social media is a distraction and in most cases we would need to avoid it instead of trying to put it closer and let people spend their time as they wish, control is mandatory in most cases. Thus, the path to finding solution goes to eliminating distractions (or jut limiting, since “eliminating” is a big word).

Having distractions at a low level is a way to get the maximum out of the worker, which remains the primary function of the employee. In fact, even those distractions that may bring something positive to the project outcome eventually, even these ones, at the point where they take place pull away the worker’s attention and in most cases would have negative impact on the current task that the person had been doing before getting interrupted. There was a study where colleague students were asked to write an essay three times under three different circumstances. In the first case they were working on the essay without getting distracted; in the second they were distracted before the task; and in the third distractions were occurring during the task. (Even Small Distractions Derail Productivity, 2016) Eventually, no student did the task better in the case with distractions occurring than in the case without it. In fact, 96% of them did worse and 4% held the outcome on the same level. This sounds very simple and it actually is. The solution to the problem does not always have to be creative or unique, and not necessarily something new. Sometimes things are quite direct: if distractions decrease productivity – we should avoid them.

Especially, given the modern nature of some offices going open-office structure, where basically there are no strict rules, limitations in employee interaction, walls, strict timings, etc. In an environment like that we are even more exposed to distractions, and as a study about open-office shows “We’re 15% less productive, we have immense trouble concentrating and we’re twice as likely to get sick in open working spaces”. (Borzykowski, 2017).

Although, the aim of this study is distractions, not open-office environment. Therefore, it would be crucial to cover them, see what distractions there are.

### 2.3 Types of distractions and their influence

Firstly, there are different types of distraction. From the very beginning we can see the two main categories which are:

- External, and
- Internal distractions. (Martin, 2014)

External distractions first. Given the nature of this study which sets the phenomenon mostly from the managerial perspective, external distractions are easier to point out, see exactly what those are, and then start seeking the solution to eliminate them or in some cases adapt to them and turn them from negatives into positives. To a certain extent that is an issue for a manager. You cannot see the internal distractions that employees face, therefore it is harder to research those and prepare for them. Nevertheless, external ones are much easier to see and evaluate the threats an upcoming office worker might face from external ones. On behalf of CareerBuilder a research has been undertaken and a survey conducted among over 2000 human resource managers. When they were asked to mention the biggest threats to the workplace’s productivity, top 10 most mentioned looked like this : Figure 7.



Figure 7. Biggest productivity killers at work (2016)

The interesting thing about this data is that out of all of these distractions not a single one is internal. Since the study (New CareerBuilder Survey Reveals the Most Common and Strangest Productivity Killers at Work, 2015) has been conducted among managers, in the results table we do not see a single internal distraction. This means to us that as managers, we should keep in mind that there are things that distract our employees and kill their productivity and sometimes we cannot see those. However, the fact that we cannot spot those factors does not mean that they do not exist. Nevertheless, speaking of the external distractions, we can see smartphones and texting as the top productivity killer which have been mentioned by over a half of the managers asked. This is a very direct statement, which tells a potential manager to be prepared for solving the problem with smartphones. At the same time, interestingly enough the same study which also included above 3000 full-

time employees has revealed that only 10% of those workers believe that they had their productivity decreased because of the smartphone usage at work. 66% of employees said that they use their smartphones several times per day for work-related issues, thus it may now be seen as a good thing. The chief HR officer at CareerBuilder (the company conducted the study), Rosemary Haefner stated that there should be balance between the two. "While we need to be connected to devices for work, we're also a click away from alluring distractions from our personal lives like social media and various other apps" (New CareerBuilder Survey Reveals the Most Common and Strangest Productivity Killers at Work, 2015). Thus, there may be both positive and negative outcome from it. Some surprising results have been derived from the study among over 500 employees by Frost & Sullivan where it has been revealed: an average of 34% of Productivity Gained as a Result of Smartphone Usage. (The Smartphone Productivity Effect, 2016, 3). Those are quite surprising results, given how many employers see smartphones as the primary distraction. Are they wrong with it? Are smartphones actually boosting productivity? As it frequently happens, the truth lies somewhere in between. The given study by Frost & Sullivan takes different industries and some of those include on-the-move professions where it is necessary for people to work on their smartphones. The other thing to keep in mind is that not every time an employee grabs the smartphone is it done to complete a work-related task. A study by Samsung has shown the main activities workers perform on their smartphones. (Figure 8)

## What are these workers doing on their phones?

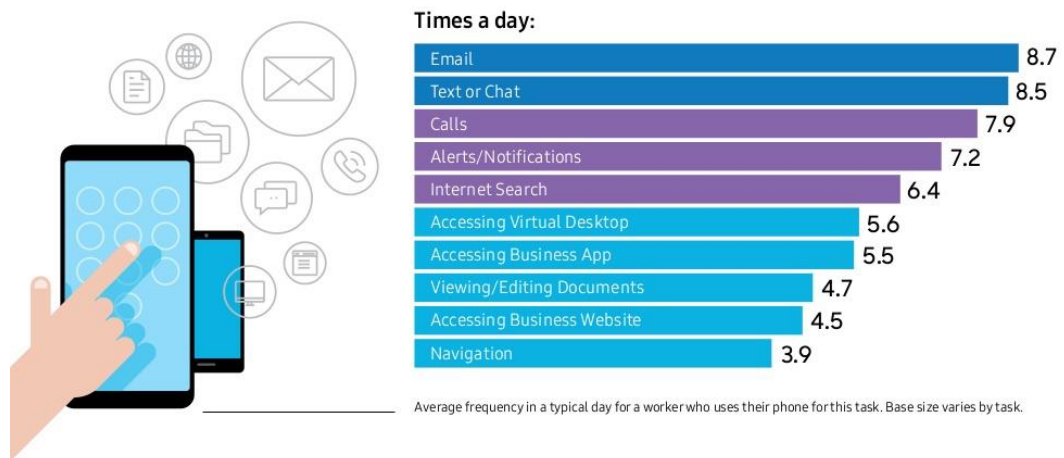


Figure 8. What are these workers doing on their phones? (McCarty, 2017)

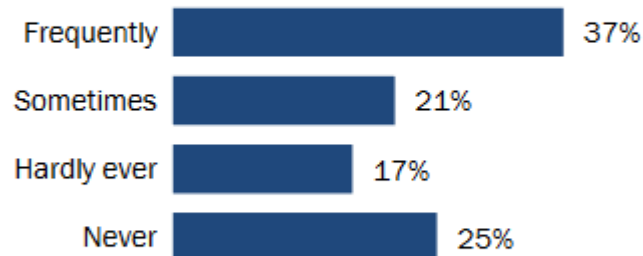
Here we see that, even though business activities are ranked sufficiently high, on the top there are things such as texts, calls, emails that very frequently do not relate to the current work activity and in fact are distractions and drag productivity down. So, summarizing the topic of smartphones we can state that, whether smartphones hold the productivity back or enhance it, what we definitely should do is to educate our managers, and encourage them to see the given phenomenon from different perspectives. A dialogue should take place and it should reveal whether smartphones are used mostly for work-related activities and should be encouraged to use, or there should be certain limitations in a case they do not have much to do with work in a particular enterprise.

As for other top-tier distractions we have internet and social media. (New CareerBuilder Survey Reveals the Most Common and Strangest Productivity Killers at Work, 2015) There is no need to state how much of a game changer internet has become for a modern office. Obviously there are many ways to use internet efficiently at work, it makes things much easier and helps contact partners, clients, or anyone else who is not right next to the user. Nevertheless, we can see how internet is utilized at the workplace and it is not always a very productive manner. In fact, 25% of workers never use internet for working activities. (Figure 9)

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## 25% of workers never use internet for job-related tasks

*% of full- or part-time workers who use the internet to do work-related tasks in a typical day ...*



Source: Survey conducted Sept. 11-21, 2014.  
"Social Media and the Workplace."

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Figure 9. Percentage of full- or part-time workers who use the internet to do work-related tasks in a typical day (Olmstead, Lampe, and Ellsion, 2016, 6)

This may seem like a serious issue. Although, we have to keep in mind that not all workers in this study had their workplace in an office. What we can see from here is that even for workers in other industries internet remains a distraction and a thing that they very frequently use at work for tasks that do not relate to the activity they are supposed to be performing at the given moment.

This perfectly lines up with social media, which in fact is one of the activities users may experience while surfing the internet. One of those activities that can distract very well and decrease productivity. A research has shown that: "an average of 2.35 hours is spent accessing social media at work every day". (Social media affecting workplace productivity: Report, 2016) That is a lot of time; and regarding what usage for these social media websites is, the same study shows that out of those employees who accessed social media at work, about 83% of them spent a significant amount of time browsing Facebook. Plus, given the fact that Facebook normally is the most visited social media website at work, (Figure 10) we can state that there are significant productivity losses due to browsing Facebook at working hours.

	TOTAL HAVE EVER DONE THIS	----- DID YESTERDAY	HAVE NOT DONE THIS	DON'T KNOW	REFUSED
<b>Use Twitter</b>					
Current	23	n/a	77	<1	0
September 2013	18	n/a	82	<1	0
May 2013	18	n/a	82	<1	<1
December 2012	16	n/a	84	<1	<1
August 2012	16	n/a	84	<1	0
February 2012	15	8	85	<1	0
August 2011	12	5	88	<1	0
May 2011	13	4	87	<1	0
January 2011	10	n/a	90	<1	<1
December 2010	12	n/a	88	<1	0
November 2010	8	2	92	0	<1
<b>Use Instagram</b>					
Current	23	n/a	77	<1	0
September 2013	17	n/a	82	<1	0
December 2012	13	n/a	87	<1	0
August 2-5, 2012	12	n/a	88	1	0
<b>Use Pinterest</b>					
Current	28	n/a	72	<1	0
September 2013	21	n/a	77	2	<1
December 2012	15	n/a	83	2	0
August 2-5, 2012	12	n/a	87	1	<1
<b>Use LinkedIn</b>					
Current	28	n/a	72	<1	0
September 2013	22	n/a	77	1	<1
<b>Use Facebook</b>					
Current	71	n/a	28	0	<1
September 2013	71	n/a	29	0	0
December 13-16, 2012	67	n/a	33	0	<1

Figure 10. Most frequently used social media websites (Olmstead, Lampe, and Ellison, 2016, 11)

This is essential that we can understand what purposes are of using social media at the workplace, and unfortunately in most cases those are not related to work, the same study demonstrates. (Figure 11) Most frequently it is done to have a mental break from work, which is a good thing but given the number of other distractions the worker is normally surrounded by and the average time it takes him/her to come back to the initial task (Matter, 2013) make it look like a serious threat to the productivity.

<1 Refused (VOL.)

**AMONG CURRENTLY EMPLOYED AND USE ANY SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS [N=592]**

**UM14 [FOR FIRST ITEM: In your current job,] do you ever use social media to...[INSERT ITEMS; RANDOMIZE]?**

	Yes	No	Don't know (VOL.)	Refused (VOL.)
a. Get information that helps you solve problems at your job	26	74	<1	0
b. Make or support professional connections that help you do your job	32	68	0	<1
c. Keep you connected to family and friends while at work	35	65	0	<1
d. Take a mental break from work	45	54	0	<1
e. Ask work-related questions of people OUTSIDE your organization	16	84	0	0
f. Ask work-related questions of people INSIDE your organization	16	83	<1	<1
g. Build or strengthen personal relationships with coworkers	23	77	0	0
h. Learn more about someone you work with	23	77	0	0

Figure 11. What workers use social media for (Olmstead, Lampe, and Ellsion, 2016, 12)

Thus, social media and internet are both very common and are used a lot at work and not always in the right way. Another phenomenon where it does not seem possible to do a complete ban because there are some work activities to do with these tools that are mandatory. However, again we face a managerial issue where the right balance and supervision are required to remain productivity on the desired level.

Despite of that, speaking of other main distraction mentioned by HR managers in CareerBuilder study we have got there some local social interactions that seem to be disturbing, such as:

- “Gossip”,
- “Co-workers dropping by”,
- “Smoke breaks/snack breaks”,
- “Meetings”, and
- “Noisy co-workers”.

Those are inevitable consequences of having multiple people doing routine activities in one room. There will be some interaction between the individuals, and it will be taking attention away from the main activity the worker has been performing.

Managerial attempts to deal with these and other distractions will be covered in the part 2.4. Solutions.



Thus, these are some of the main external distractions in the office environment that managers nowadays see as productivity killers. Some of them are critical, but all of these so far remain visible, until it comes to internal distractions for employees.

Internal distractions are a very underestimated issue. We cannot see them, therefore we tend to care about them less. However, it might be a serious issue for some workers, and prevail in distracting employee attention. The survey done by ComPsych Corp. has showed that out of over 1200 workers in the poll, about 22% of them see personal relationship issues as the main distraction at work. (Vesely, 2012) That is a big number, and a serious issue. The difference between employers and employees is that workers are naturally tend to not see such things as social media, internet, breaks as distractions. They normally see it as a way to maintain communication with their friends and family, and breaks as a way to maintain friendly and positive relationships with co-workers. Although, there is some truth to it, we have seen that there are many serious drawbacks to those external factors, and even though managers do have the tendency to see those as obstacles, it does not seem to apply to employees to this extent. The same study shows the contrast in employee perspective: while 22% see personal relationship issues as the top distraction, only 4% of participants highlighted personal communication tools (social media, smartphones, emails) as their main distraction. (Vesely, 2012) Despite of that, we are not interested as much in what particular people from various perspectives see as a top priority, right now we are rather more interested in the phenomenon itself and how it shapes workplace. And this is what is so unique about internal distractions. They are not limited to a specific place where the employed person comes and only then faces those. Telecommuters face internal distractions too and have to deal with them along with external ones they have in the home environment. In fact, what is even more interesting about internal distractions is that they are not limited to work at all. Students face them at school just as much, or even more than at work. Some of the most frequent internal distractions have been presented in the book "Academic Transformation: The Road to College Success". (De Sellers, Carol W. Dochen, and Russ Hodges, 2015, 69) The list of those internal distractions that college students have to deal with includes

- "Boredom/dislike of subject",

- “Anxiety caused by subject”,
- “Personal problems and worries”,
- “Daydreaming”,
- “Complexity of study task”,
- “Negative reactions to noise or environment (your feelings and self-talk)”,  
and
- “Fatigue”.

Some of these college distractions may be very well faced by full-time office workers as well. Fatigue for instance, an issue that college students face and see what impact it has on workers. Another study by ComPsych Corp. has shown how: “59% have high levels of stress, with extreme fatigue/feeling out of control”. (Three out of Five Employees Are Highly Stressed, According to ComPsych Survey, 2017) Some other internal phenomenon, like boredom/dislike of subject is not too different for students and workers. A study by Gallup has shown that out of over 150,000 american full-time workers about 70% are normally either not engaged in work process or even hate their jobs, which has a lot in common with the case of a student who cannot enjoy the given subject at school. (Stebner, 2013) These results let us derive multiple conclusions.

1. There are distractions even in a quiet room with no external factors grabbing attention away.
2. Distractions do not only come at work, but they also appear in other points of life and areas. Although, the distraction itself is not necessarily different.
3. It seems extremely challenging to eliminate all distractions, since there will always be some factors that will disturb the worker.

This leads to the idea that perhaps not all distractions are manageable. There might be some things to take the employee’s attention away that we simply have no control over.

Firstly we observed manageable distractions. Those have been covered a lot already and there is not much specific to state about those. For example, if we are talking about social media distracting employees, employers might put limits on social media usage and access to specific websites; so can employees themselves try to control themselves and do their best in order to not get stuck with this social media. Many of distractions covered do not necessarily have a solution, but a lot of them are capable of getting one. Whereas, when it comes to inevitable distractions things might turn a little different.

Something as simple as the season it currently is may have a severe impact on productivity and likeliness to get distracted. A study has shown how productivity may drop by 20% during the summertime. (Sprung, 2012) This same study which was undertaken among 600 white collar workers also shows that the probability to get distracted increases by 45% in this period. It is a huge change, which workers experience everywhere and there is nothing management can do about this. The only possible solution is to stay focused and not let yourself get distracted.

Obviously, there could be mentoring sessions and suggestions from management to the employees on how to stay motivated and not lose all your endurance. However, the fact remains, it is harder for people to work in the summer months, and distractions get tougher for office workers. Thus, we just have to deal with it.

Another variable that may have direct impact on productivity and cannot have a direct solution is weather. A study has demonstrated that for office workers bad weather conditions (rainy, cloudy, cold days) increase productivity at work. (Lee, Geeno, and Staats, 2012) Briefly, office workers have a tendency to get distracted by all the opportunities sunny days bring and all outdoor activities that stay behind the window. Thus, the attention drifts away along with the overall productivity of both the unit and the individual. However, it is not always true for different industries and workplaces. Truck drivers, for instance, oppositely benefit from good weather conditions, whereas in cloudy or rainy days they might feel less inspired and engaged, but since we speak about office environment we can point out certain weather conditions as an inevitable factor that would eventually have an impact on the performance and distraction probability.

For managerial view it is important outcome and knowledge. There are things that we cannot control that will still impact performance of our unit. Thus, we can see from a perspective similar to what a Canadian writer and productivity consultant Chris Bailey has been proposing. (Figure 12) His view includes these points:

- Dealing with all the distractions that we may have control over, i.e coping with manageable ones. Most distractions fit this category. For example, if you have loud colleagues, plug your headphones in and play some background music that will quiet the noise but would not distract you at the same time.
- For those that are inevitable and annoying it is best to just deal with them as quickly as possible and get back to the original task. Let's say there is a meeting taking place while one was working on a project. So it is inevitable; therefore one should just participate in the meeting. The only thing he/she can do is to get motivation quick enough and get back to the task, after the inevitable disturbing activity is over.
- For those distractions that are inevitable, but "fun" (or we can say there is some positive aspect in them) the way is to enjoy them, since you cannot control them, then at least try to get something good out of this kind of distraction. For example, lunch is inevitable at some point, then it might be better to get something good out of it, and for instance accompany some of your colleagues and improve relationships with them.

### FOUR TYPES OF DISTRACTIONS / INTERRUPTIONS

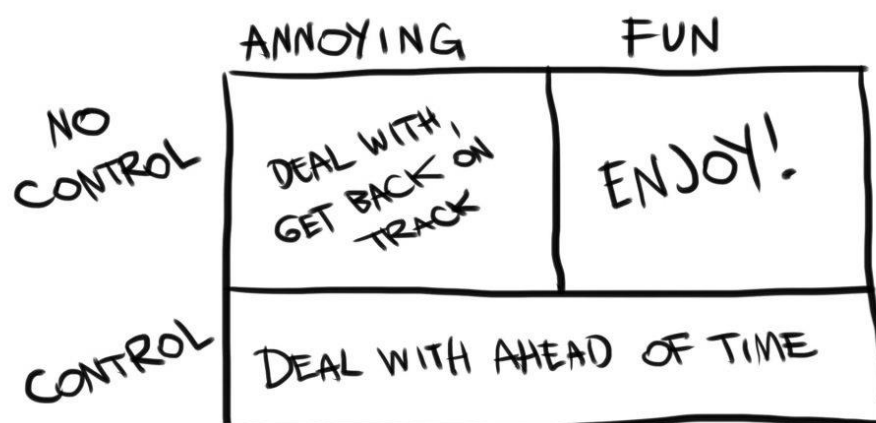


Figure 12. Four types of distractions/interruptions (Bailey, 2016)

Overall it is clearly seen what a huge issue distractions are. There are manageable ones, inevitable ones, internal, external. With the data presented it is seen such a serious impact they have on the workplace productivity. The question is: what has been done so far? What solutions have been presented by management, what techniques might have already been implemented by individuals to remain their attention at the desired level?

## 2.4 Current solutions

The objective here is not to define the best ways to deal with certain distractions, nor to come up with some creative solution that would have positive impact on the phenomenon. The objective is to see how distractions are treated in the real world, and what kind of solutions are implemented to cope with various distractions.

Considering primary threats we have seen, smartphones and texting as the productivity killer that managers point out most frequently. (New CareerBuilder Survey Reveals the Most Common and Strangest Productivity Killers at Work, 2015) From the same poll of managers 23% have been banning cell phones and personal calls; about 21% monitor internet usage and emails; 33% blocked certain websites, which is rather about internet and social media that happen to be the other top-tier distraction, according to over 2000 managers. Although, these things are related, given the norm of employees having multiple devices, we can see these as all kinds of technological distractions. As for employees themselves and their smartphones, the common solution has been self-control and either silencing their phone or placing it somewhere it would not grab attention and be hard to access. (7 Common Workplace Distractions and How To Overcome Them, 2017) Similar case is seen linking with social media. The most common way to not get trapped is to be careful and prepared. Not checking their social media, focusing on the task remains the most common solution for the employee.

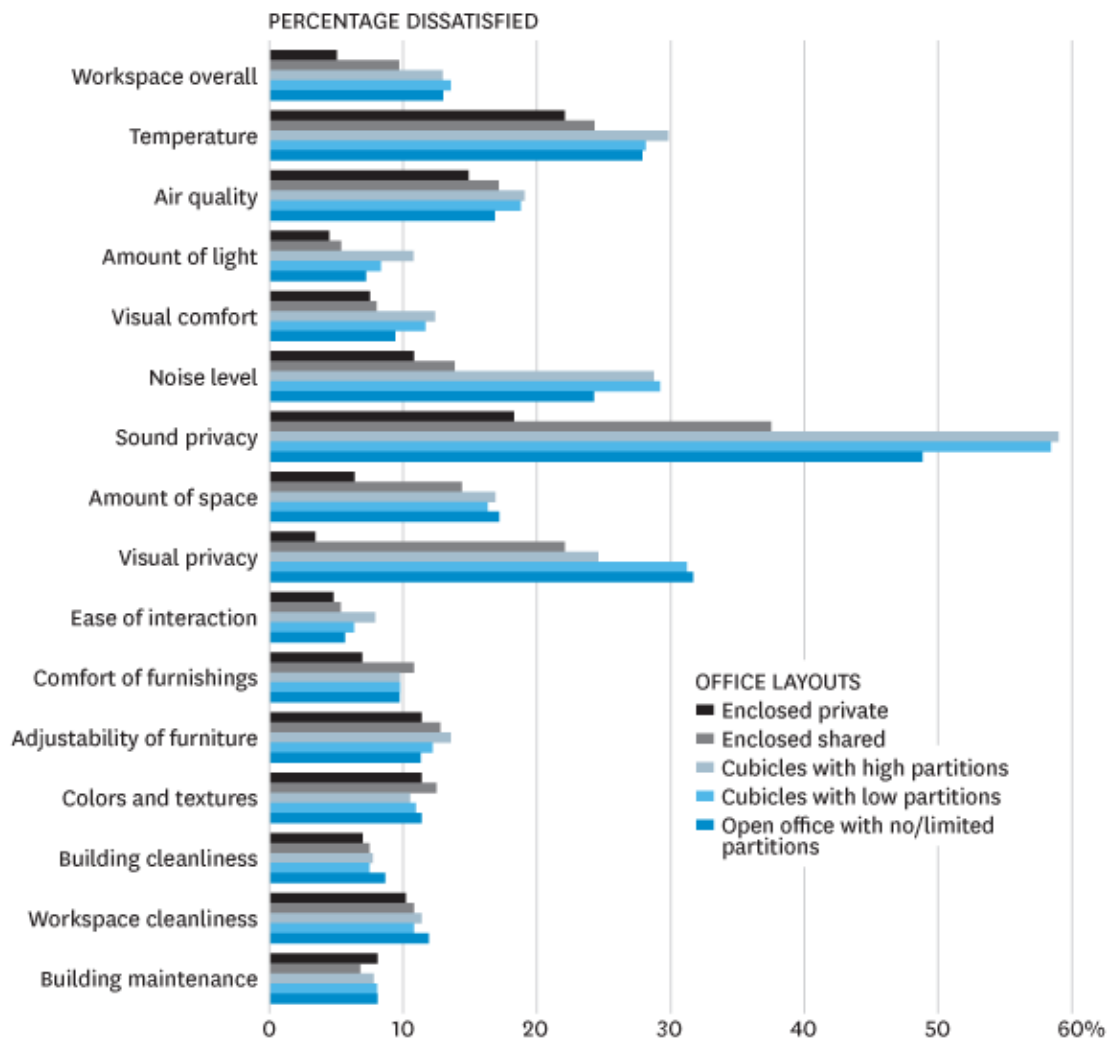
Another frequent distraction in the office environment is gossip. That CareerBuilder study found that about 21% of asked managers tried to implement scheduled lunch and break times in order to have a specific time for people to chat and let all the gossip go out at a moment when it is allowed. (New CareerBuilder Survey Reveals the

Most Common and Strangest Productivity Killers at Work, 2015) It is one of the ways management deals with gossip. The other is to directly address dissatisfaction with employees chatting, either once during a meeting/via email, or state many individuals rebukes to the employees. This kind of behavior when the supervisor tells the person to stop discussing something with a co-worker, which in fact might be a work-related topic may be seen as aggressive behavior, and aggression at the workplace might eventually have negative impact on individual performance. (Burden, 2015)

The other common condition causing distraction in the office environment is noise. Noisy colleagues chatting, having phone calls, sounds from devices around, even something as simple as typing on the keyboard might be disturbing. According to a study from the University of Sydney, out of various features of surroundings, lack of sound privacy is seen by employees as the biggest frustration at the office. (Figure 13)

### EVERYONE CAN HEAR YOU, NOW

Lack of sound privacy is the biggest frustration we have with our cubicles.



SOURCE ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM THE CENTER ON THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT  
BY JUNGSOO KIM AND RICHARD DE DEAR, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

HBR.ORG

Figure 13. Negative factors on employee morale (Calisi, Stout, 2015)

More and more noise is generated while fewer doors are placed in the room. Therefore, management may consider planning their office carefully to ensure having low level of noise. It is mostly about design. Using materials that would absorb sound. Those exist for floors, walls, and even ceilings; providing spaces for quiet work and separate spaces for noisy activities, and etc. As for employees, the most common technique is to tell the loud co-worker to be quiet. In the case it is not enough, some people use headphones to isolate sound and play background music. There are many studies that have shown the positive effect of music on productivity, mood, happiness, performance at repetitive tasks, and creativity. (Grills, 2017) Therefore, we can see it as a good solution for an individual. The two things to consider, however, is to

firstly, ensure it is the right type of music, because not any music has good impact on productivity, for example, too many lyrics might be very disturbing, whereas classical music or nature music, for example, can do very well. (Chu, 2017) The second crucial thing with headphones is to know that it is used in the right way, not for watching videos on YouTube, or consuming other types of entertaining content instead of working. The solution is like in a case of smartphones, having trust in your employees and letting them use the tools that may have positive impact on their performance by showing managerial loyalty.

As for other common distractions, things are not always very straightforward and quick. For example, with anxiety there are many small things that individuals can do, but not too many direct solutions to solve the problem once and for all. (Murphy, 2016) Some other distractions have a different case where the solution seems to be right on the surface, but by implementing managers may generate a chain reaction of other issues. One thing that can be stated is that oftentimes employees themselves might solve the problem of a possible distraction in advance and it would save a lot to both the company and the individual. There is no need for management to run social media policies in the case employees know how to control themselves and they simply do not constantly get distracted by it. Once again, this saves managerial resources and expands individual opportunities, since there would not be a policy on social media usage if no one gets distracted by it, and then it can be embraced and used only in the efficient way either for the unit, or individual's life.

Overall, these were the main things to consider when discussing different types of distractions, their impact on productivity in office environments, and common solutions seen implemented around the companies.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research methods**

The research aim is to evaluate the general trends of the modern office environment regarding distractions, and afterwards to compare it with existing distractions in start-up environments. Then, the goal is to provide a suitable solution to the most



common distractions that the given workplaces are exposed to, based on the knowledge base the research had. The study itself is going to be mostly descriptive, since there is no objective to find a new solution, nor very ambitious goal to improvement. Instead, this study focuses on trends that exist, the phenomenon of distractions itself and how they shape the modern workplace. Therefore, it is mostly a descriptive study.

The basis to the methodological structure of this research is going to be the ‘research onion’ presented in the book “Research methods for business students”, Figure 14. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2009, 108)

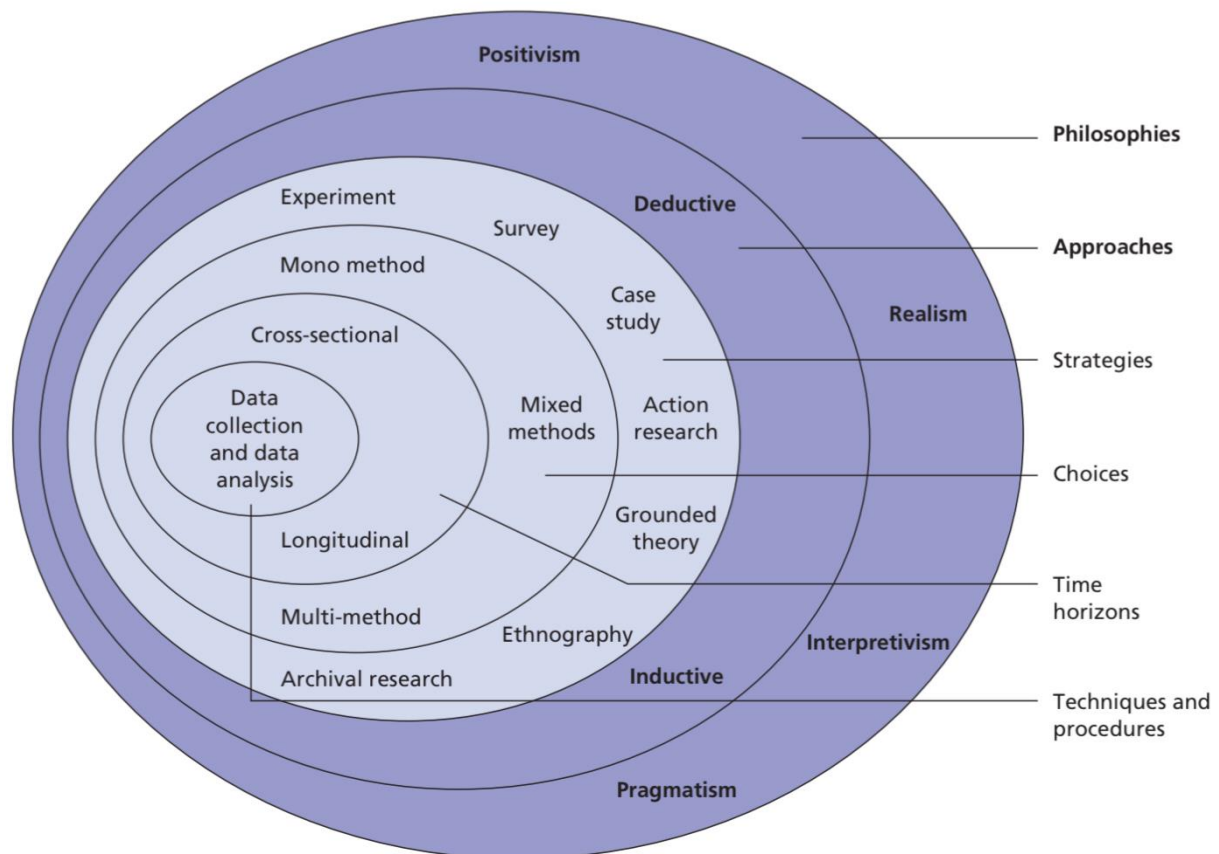


Figure 14. The research onion (Saunders et al. 2009)

Each layer of this onion has to be picked accurately to the particular study in order to undertake one properly. It starts with something as remote as research philosophy, which stands for assumptions about the way researcher views the world (Saunders et al. 2009, 108), and down to actual techniques used to collect empirical data.

The philosophy picked for this study is: Interpretivism. Since, the ontology, epistemology, axiology fit the best for interpretivism (Saunders et al. 2009, 119). The study looks at subjective meanings motivating actions, social phenomenon, and focuses on details of the given situation. Therefore, along with that the paradigm of the study is also going to be interpretive, Figure 15.

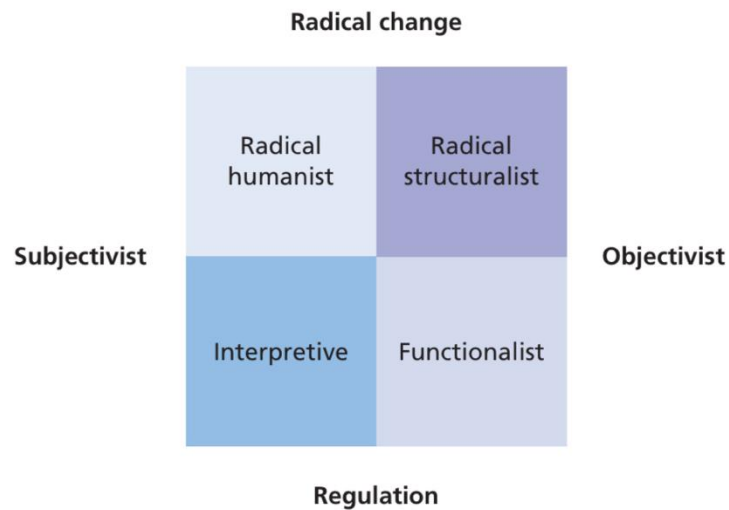


Figure 15. Four paradigms for the analysis of social theory (Saunders et al. 2009,120)

The inductive approach has been picked because induction itself is about finding what meanings people attach to certain events; a more flexible structure regarding research choices, unlike it is in deduction. (Saunders et al. 2009, 127)

The closest to this study strategy presented in the framework (Figure 13) is case study. It fits the way data shall be collected, since this study is interested in the context where the particular activity, distraction, occurs (Saunders et al. 2009, 146). Also, it gives the opportunity to evaluate multiple cases to see whether it is a single unique phenomenon occurring in one particular environment, or perhaps there is a certain tendency. Thus, it gives some more flexibility to the researcher, which is desired for the data collection within this study.

Research choice is made to be mixed method with the collection of qualitative data. Primarily, no numerical data shall be collected. This way, the research has opportunities to collect data in multiple ways, based on accessibility. The key is that techniques would not drastically change, there may only be switch between focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews.

Time horizons for this study will be cross-sectional. The study takes the particular period of time, the present: spring 2018, and observes phenomenon within the current circumstances of the given environments.

The actual techniques used to collect data are going to be either focus group interviews, or regular interviews. Therefore, the interviewee has the time to think about the context and all various aspects that relate to the phenomenon. Along with that the interviewer has the opportunity to observe the way the respondent evaluates certain questions and how he/she reacts, which brings more qualitative data to look through. As mentioned earlier, techniques might switch due to various interviewees' availability.

In summary, this study will be held among start-up companies workers. There is going to be interaction between the researcher and participants in order to encourage a deeper analysis of the phenomenon. The data collection is designed to gain understanding of what workers in start-up companies see as distractions and how they treat those at work.

### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

Meeting workers from various start-up companies and asking them to point out the most common distractions they face when they work. The important thing to highlight is that outcome of this primary data collection is going to determine activities that will derive with the analysis. Thus, the first case is that how research might show distractions that had already been encountered and analyzed within this study based on secondary data knowledge base from chapter 2. In this case, there is going to be a short analysis of the particular case with the specific surrounding features of the given case company. Afterwards, based on the knowledge researcher gained, a recommendation on finding a suitable solution to the existing distraction will be provided accordingly along with the second analysis of the particular distraction. If research gains this kind of findings, then there will be approval of the theory extracted from secondary data sources and its applicability to start-up environments as well. Also, along with that, a hypothesis will be brought regarding

possible tendency of the particular distraction and its common existence in start-up environments.

The second way the research findings may turn out is a new phenomenon. By the end of the analysis stage, there is a possibility to extract a new phenomenon that was not encountered throughout the entire study due to its limited capacity. However, there might be something that the particular start - up companies have tendency to get distracted by while they are at work. The possibility of encountering a new phenomenon is fairly high, since knowledge base did not include materials dedicated to start-up environments particularly, since firstly there was a significant amount of other things to study; and secondly it was designed for this research to apply a new perspective on distractions in start – ups particularly at this primary data collection stage. Therefore, if this is the case for the outcome, then there will be a re-analysis of certain findings from chapter 2 and inability of some of those findings to fit the particular companies studied might be stated. Along with that, for the case with a new phenomenon found, there will be a specific analysis of this kind of distraction based on secondary data gained earlier, or new findings for the specific case faced.

### 3.3 Research ethics

Ethical appropriateness and transparency are at the core of this study and follow throughout every stage.

During the process of picking the topic for the study, the main priority was to pick the one that would be both interesting to the researcher and meaningful to the society at large. Simplicity of the subject, accessibility of the materials, and networks of the researcher did not play an important role in making decision on the topic of the study.

At the stage of going through secondary data the researcher was critical towards all sources; was remaining objective with any evaluation, and did not choose sources by how suitable they are to his personal believes. Instead, sources have been picked by their fit to the topic of the study and the scientific evidence those sources are capable of providing for the statements they make. All statements and ideas not

originated from the researcher, are all mentioned in the text, referenced, and acknowledged.

When interviewing participants during the primary data collection each of them was aware of this research taking place; each of the participants has given the verbal consent for participation in interviews. The confidentiality and anonymity of every participant is not a subject to disclose, or to provide any information about, other than the researcher himself. The participants have provided verbal permission to quote their statements from the interviews; the researcher ensures to not take any statements out of context and to never use them against the participants.

Participants are allowed to demand researcher to stop the interview at any point; and to ask researcher to not disclose some of the things they mention.

For the analysis part, the researcher ensures to maintain objective and to derive conclusions based on scientific evidence and both primary and secondary data. Researcher's personal beliefs and opinions are not going to have impact on the final statements the study makes.

## **4 Results**

Narrowing down the area of the study, it has reached the point where the researcher had enough information gathered to dig deeper into the topic and collect primary data from start-up companies. The data about the way they would treat the most common distractions and what those essentially are at their workplaces. This chapter is dedicated to revealing results of interviews with participants from start-up companies sharing their most common distractions at the workplace and the overall treatment of those. All participants have given verbal consent for utilizing the ideas they shared in this study and quoting them. This chapter is firstly going to describe the distracting phenomena that participants from three various start-up companies have mentioned during the interviews. Along with that in the case of need secondary data will be used to have some scientific evidence following the empiric findings, or a wider search for secondary materials if the phenomenon was not mentioned well in this study earlier. Afterwards, chapter 4.2 will disclose the solutions that participants use in their environment to solve the specific problem they encounter. It can as well

be followed by additional secondary data usage in order to support or object those techniques used. And finally chapter 4.3 will present the solutions, tools, or specific techniques that can be used efficiently by companies-participants in the future in order to avoid or prevent the problem from occurring again. This will also take some scientific data as basis for finding the suitable option.

#### 4.1 The common distractions participants face

Primarily, it is necessary to mention that the distractions participants have mentioned oftentimes are interrelated and one distraction can be classified differently, even though it is essentially the same thing. For example, some participants referred to noise as an issue that is tend to distract them, some other participants have mentioned phone calls as one. However, the moment a co-worker in the same room makes a phone call and the other worker hears it, it is a distraction generated by the noise the person generates while on the phone. So, even though these distractions are similar to a certain extent, their categorization might be complicated. Therefore, it has been decided to keep the format the same and present distractions as participants presented them.

Nevertheless, some common ground has been observed between companies; there were some distractions that various participants have mentioned more than once. One of those is noise. Noise is seen by participants as a serious issue to their productivity and ability to focus, which makes total sense, given the noise's ability to impact productivity. (Errett, Bowden, Choiniere, Wang, 2006, 7) Those distractions in particular vary due to uniqueness of each workplaces, so those are not necessarily always the same kind of distracting noise. For example, participants of one of the companies have mentioned the noises that exist in the environment where their office is located. Since there are multiple other offices, they can hear what other people are doing at the moment, if some of them are being loud, if someone passes their cabinet, if someone is chatting, if there are people having lunch. Whatever that noise distraction is, the workers in the room can hear loud things happen and it is distracting to them. Whereas, for the other company the issue was mostly its internal corporate noises that they generated themselves. They were telling the researcher about loud colleagues who might be on the phone, or chatting, or having some other

way to generate noises by people within the company. However, both types of these noise distractions lead to the same outcome. As for participants, while sharing the stories about getting distracted on daily basis they were mostly agreeing with each other and supporting each other's points actively. For example, when participants from one of those companies were being interviewed, one of them was telling the story how they always have external noises next to the room, her co-worker was agreeing and showing the corridor where people pass and how close it is to the room where they work; therefore how easily it is for them to be affected by those external noises. Nevertheless, both external and internal noises (office noises) are going to the same category, since there are the same solutions that the companies have shared for both types. (More in 4.2) Surprisingly, along with noise, the other distraction that more than one company have mentioned was phone calls. Interestingly enough, it is also the kind of distraction that is similar to noise. However, this time various participants have had similar kind of issues, what they told about was distraction occurring at the workplace; everyone is trying to focus on his/her task and all of a sudden a phone call comes, distracts everyone, and afterwards, the person accepts the call. In the cases studied, the participants told that the person receiving phone call usually leaves the room to accept the phone call there. Nevertheless, it is a distraction that occurs and it does two important things:

1. It distracts co-workers when the phone starts to ring.
2. It distracts the person accepting the call and pulls him/her away from the task, which makes it hard to go back to the initial task, according to the participants.

The other common situation presented by a participant occurs during a meeting. The company has a meeting and the project manager in the middle of speech may receive a phone call and this would disrupt the entire meeting. The problem this company faces in this situation is that there are some phone calls, which as described by the project manager himself he cannot skip, since there are business calls that are absolutely necessary to accept, or otherwise something might go wrong with one of the projects that the company is working on right now, described project manager. Another case described by the representative of another company shows how personal calls might also be a source of distraction. Sometimes those workers may

receive one from their families or friends and they would have to take a moment and call them back. As this representative has mentioned, the key here is to have your phone on you and leave the room without grabbing too much attention and not distract anyone else in the room. It is indeed crucial that even if one gets distracted by a phone call, it is necessary to not let your conversation disrupt your colleagues' processes, since for many of them loud colleagues are likely to be the biggest distraction at the workplace. (Smith, 2013) All these phone calls lead to distractions that these companies have to deal with, and are the ones they are tend to encounter more than other ones.

Despite calls reaching us via our phones there is another distraction that different participants agreed on. Those are notifications. Once again, quite similar to phone calls, since it is also a noise that pops on one's device and pulls attention away. However, phone calls take further interaction and have different ways to clash them, unlike notifications, therefore it has been categorized as a different kind of distraction. Nonetheless, representatives of the companies-participants were interested in notifications as such, and talked a lot about them. Although, as they stated, it is not that much of a problem for them now because they declare that they have dealt with this problem, and they do not get distracted by notifications on their phone and computer while at work, which certainly is a good thing, since receiving notifications while executing a task may turn out in poor performance. (White, 2015) Some participants have also mentioned that most notifications they receive on the phone are not relevant to work. As they mentioned, those are usually from Facebook, or texts from friends and family, therefore, the worker can already know ahead that if something pops up on the phone it is usually not work-related. From observing these workers, it seems like they have already had experience and they know how to deal with notifications, therefore they are supposed to be able to point out the phenomenon, although none of them has set this as a serious issue that he/she would face daily. What is important to say is that even though none of those workers have stated that they might get distracted by notifications, it does not mean that it does not ever happen to them. The nature of this research and data collection is to see it from the perspective of what people can share and how they see the phenomenon. Clarifying whether it is true or not, whether start-up workers have a



tendency to get distracted by notifications or not is a topic for another research. Here the research has an objective to point out the way the workers themselves treat it and whether they see it as a distraction or not. It has been important to point out since notifications can sometimes be just as distracting as phone calls can be. (Pang, 2015) Furthermore, there is much more exposure to the ability to focus in that case, since there are a lot of push notifications on the phones in our days, and reacting to every single one of them could be a lot of damage to the productivity. On average, an app would send 51 push notifications per month, (Gazdecki, 2015) and adding to it how many apps people on average have on their phone, which is around 27 for US citizens. (Rosoff, 2016) We can see from it that notifications are a serious threat and it is great if these companies have managed to prevent disruptions from happening. However, it still cannot be stated that start-up office workers do not get distracted by notifications at all. Nevertheless, it is a good starting point for further research and at least the minor tendency can be observed and outlined.

One of the most popular categories of apps that one receives push notifications from on the phone, and at the same time one of the most widely spread distractions at the workplace is social media. (New CareerBuilder Survey Reveals the Most Common and Strangest Productivity Killers at Work, 2015) In this study it has also been mentioned by participants as one of the things they see as a distraction. Social media has already been covered a lot in this study in chapter 2, and that knowledge has been very useful in order to understand the phenomenon. As for the companies studied, they did not show anything special, social media issue seems just the same as how it does to a more mature company. It is still all about the human factor and whether the person does get distracted by it or not. Participants have mentioned that they do not use it for work and mostly stick to work-related tools. However, just like with notifications, same thing can be stated about social media as such. This study cannot state that start-up workers do not get distracted by social media. Once again, it has been a couple of cases and we might set a hypothesis based on that. Although, it takes a bigger research effort to make a statement like that. Plus, even some of these participants agreed that sometimes they get distracted and end up on social media for an activity not related to work.

Social media brings the issue of distracting communication from the digital world, whereas in the actual office without social media usage, communication also arises and becomes a distraction for workers in. Even though it is essentially a distraction, there are still small differences between each enterprise. For example, representative of one of the companies has mentioned that employees do talk to each other while at the workplace, but solely on work-related topics. Afterwards, when they are done with the task, or are going to grab a coffee, then they have time that they can spend on chatting about personal things. This is not a policy, rather the attitude that these people set for themselves. Whereas another company faces chatting problem more often. As the representative of this company told there are only 14 people in their office, so they “are like a family” and it is normal for them to approach each other with a topic to cover, which does not necessarily relate to work and they do end up distracted sometimes as the result of this kind of communication. Also, all of the studied companies have their workplace settled more to open-office principles. Therefore, there is an even higher chance, with no walls, to get distracted by a colleague and it also refers to the point with noise. Open offices expose workers to more noise and decrease their productivity. (Scalco, 2017)

At the end of the day, it is important to point out that even though chatting about personal things and discussing work-related tasks are two different things, participants still mentioned them as a distraction. The workers acknowledge the act of getting distracted from the task, even though they state that sometimes it is “for good” and helpful to stop and discuss something else than an assignment.

The last distraction that has been revealed and that is certainly worth paying attention to, did not have a specific name when explained by one group of participants, but we can refer to it as “extra tasks”. The phenomenon is following. The participant told that she is a programmer in the company. At some point there might, for instance, an HR task to be completed and she would be the one who has to do it. Since, the company is small, there is simply no person who would take care solely of this specific type of assignments. Therefore, sometimes workers have to switch their roles and perform a completely different activity and there are certain risks to it. In this scenario, there is a risk of ending up multitasking and possibly not getting one of the things (or even both of them) done well. Thus, there is a risk of

lowering productivity in particular, since multitasking is tend to decrease performance. (Adler, Benbunan-Fich, 2014) This phenomenon has been only mentioned once during the entire research so far. This is a thing that is certainly more applicable to young start-up companies. Normally, in big companies workers focus on doing familiar tasks consistently, whereas in a small company one may do some completely different activity from what he/she was hired for. Moreover, it may happen very frequently, swiftly, and unpredictably. (Office Hours: Working at a startup vs. working at a large, established company, 2017) Therefore, the theory the research brings based on the findings is the following: the phenomenon of “extra tasks”, or “forced flexibility” substantially exists in the start-up environment, whereas a large company would keep familiar tasks for most of its workers for a long period of time with stable and consistent growth instead of quick and frequent changes.

Overall, the 5 out of 6 distractions revealed are among the most common ones for most of mature, established companies, therefore the study proposes the possibility of co-existence of the given distractions in both mature companies and start-up companies, thus comparable treatment may exist for both.

## 4.2 Utilised solutions

For each of the distractions mentioned the participants were as well asked to describe the way they deal with those distractions in their office. Here are the solutions that the companies-participants have shared.

For noise distractions, all of the companies studied that were mentioning noise not only stated that they use headphones to avoid noise, all of them even had a pair of headphones on their neck during the interviews. Participants mentioned that they listen to music while they are working and that it helps them focus on the task without distractions pulling attention away. This solution is especially attractive not only because it helps avoid getting distracted by noise, it can also help the worker perform the task better and have him/her capable of bringing better ideas to the project. (Pandani, 2012) This is a good technique in an office environment as described by interviewees. Oftentimes, there are inevitable noises these people have

in their office, when nobody has an intention to distract, although he/she still ends up distracting co-workers by his/her actions. As one of the participants described it, a co-worker might be typing, printing something, or sipping coffee and all these sounds distract them. Therefore, headphones are a good solution to these people.

Moreover, there is a certain level of power that headphones may have in these types of companies where people know each other well. As described by one of the participants, every time she wears headphones it is a sign for her co-workers that she wants to focus on the task, and there is no way for distractions right now. While the participant was telling this story, her co-worker was looking at the researcher and nodding, thus showing that he agreed with the point and that for this company the fact that the co-worker has got headphones on is a sign to leave him/her alone for a moment. Along with headphones, the participants have also mentioned something as simple as closing the door when there is noise outside of their working room. This might sound not even like a technique, more like common sense, that in order to not get distracted by noise, close the door from where the noise comes from. This is true, but it shows the attitude start-up companies have towards distractions. Out of all the companies studied, not a single one had some specific policies regarding distractions. In most cases, distractions are faced by simple individual's actions, such as putting headphones on or closing the door. Since, the company is very young and has a lot of limits in time and human resources, thus mostly driven by realizing importance of their actions and things one has to get done, workers in these young companies control themselves and focus more on what they as individuals can do to not get distracted.

Similar pattern applies to the phone calls distraction. The studied companies mostly do not go for policies or regulations regarding phone calls. As they described, they just talked it out once, that within their offices all smartphones should be in the silent mode during the working day. In a case someone needs to make or accept a call, he/she can leave the room and do it there, so that co-workers do not get distracted. Once again, a simple solution based on the individual's actions, rather than specific rules the company has written down. However, one of the participants shared an unusual solution that their company uses to avoid phone calls distractions. Those are phone booths located right in the office. They have a special phone booth

that is designed for open offices, so that workers would have a specific place where they can go to accept the phone call. Even though no direct evidence has been found that would state that these booths improve productivity, we know that “If you can hear someone talking while you’re reading or writing, your productivity dips by up to 66%”. (Torgovnick May, 2013) By eliminating the chances to hear a co-worker speaking on the phone we can significantly improve the chances of not getting distracted by it.

The next phenomenon on the list was notifications and like in previous cases of distractions there are not too many specific unique things that the studied companies do to avoid them. Every time notifications were mentioned during the interviews one participant would start speaking about how he/she has no notifications allowed to pop up on the phone and other participants were non-verbally agreeing with the statement, showing that they also do the same thing themselves. Along with that a participant from one of the companies has mentioned his technique to not check emails regularly, instead only do it two to three times per day and answering numerous emails for once, instead of writing or reading each email separately. This is a good technique that helps to stay in touch with work that should be done, and not spend extra effort on each email individually, especially given the fact that office workers now spend one third of their time on writing and reading emails. (Dubé, 2017)

Similar treatment has been observed in regard to social media. The representatives that mentioned social media said that they get distracted by social media almost to the same extent that any other worker potentially could. According to one of the participants, the key is self-control and the dedication of your time; if there is something mandatory, then one can have a moment to go for social media, but mostly it is better to avoid, and the studied companies definitely see social media as a distraction. Therefore, they prefer different channels for communication and different tools to use for work. When asked “Well, if you do not use social media on your phones and computers, how do you communicate with each other and in general every time there is a work related activity that has to be discussed via text?” The participants from one of the companies told that they use a specific messenger for their computers and phones that is created specifically for business activities, so

that no personal text is supposed to be there. These workers said that it works for them and they get less distracted with a specific app that only contains work-related messages. Despite all the controversy that has been observed from secondary sources on social media and whether it is good thing at work or not, all of the companies in the study stated that to them social media is more of a distraction, rather than a productive tool, therefore, they try to avoid it at work and stick to those tools that they believe to have positive impact on their performance, which for these people, social media is not a part of.

For distractions deriving from communication with co-workers, again the solutions presented by companies-participants were not extremely uncommon nor unique. Like with many other distractions, interviewees have stated that the solution to them is self-control and keeping non-related to work discussion behind the office door. However, sometimes real distractions occur starting from a fine and friendly question or statement that initiates a conversation. As described by the representative of one of the studied companies, there are just 14 people in their office and small talks are a regular issue. Later on he told, that like in many of these cases there is no specific policy on chatting, nor regulations, since the company has not come to that yet. Therefore, the solution is just to tell when you are busy and are not able to spend a couple of minutes chatting. Also, it is necessary to keep in mind that there might be significant differences between companies because of different cultures, both corporate and geographical. Whereas this study has been conducted solely among Finnish companies. There are different corporate cultures in different places of the world. (Chang, 2016) Thus, different communication styles may exist, as well as different attitudes to communication at work.

For the unexpected extra tasks, the company that faces this problem has demonstrated to the researcher the ways it normally copes with this distraction. Primarily, the representatives have told that they usually try to plan activities accordingly, so that there is no unexpected task popping up. However, given the dynamics of the environment that start-ups live in, things change quickly and sometimes a new task comes right when the employee was working on something else. In this case, the first thing workers in this company do is they leave notes for themselves to remind later where they stopped with the initial task. Afterwards, they

take a moment to analyze each task and determine which one he/she would better focus on at the particular moment. Finally, when knowing what activity to perceive next they would go for that and try to finish this task as quick as possible, without losing quality, and then return to the initial assignment. As workers have stated, the key for them is to focus on one thing per time, and try to not jump from one task to another. This attitude has positive scientific evidence; indeed, multitasking does have negative impact on performance, since there is always a need for the human brain to switch between different tasks. (To multitask or not to multitask, 2018) Therefore, the solution the company uses to deal with this “forced flexibility” looks relatively reliable, as long as it works for them, which as they stated it does.

### 4.3 Proposed solutions

Since, as pointed out earlier, the studied companies and hypothetically most of start-ups in general do not normally go for some specific policies or rules regarding distractions because of the size of the company and their inability to put a lot of resources in this kind of activity. Since, commonly they prefer to deal with distractions by personal individual’s actions, it has been decided to search for some of more advanced ways how revealed in primary data collection distractions can be faced to save productivity.

For noise, except for eliminating sources where the sounds come from and usage of headphones, there are some other things a company can do to deal with this. Primarily, it is better to have certain areas in the office where workers can focus solely on their work, so called “quiet areas”. (Calisi, Stout, 2015) There is a possibility to do it if the company has a small empty room without a specific purpose that is relatively remote from external noises. Then the management can turn it into a quiet zone. On the other hand, it is preferred to have a loud space as well, since sometimes workers have these moments when they want to chat; therefore a lunch room or a game zone would provide the area where they can do it without distracting those who are working at the moment. (Calisi, Stout, 2015) Even though start-up companies usually do not have some extra space in their office, they can just keep all non-work related talks out of the working room in this case. Along with that, management can set certain moments during the workday when no employee is

allowed to distract anyone and stay quiet, those so called “quiet times”. The moment when no meetings take place, no questions are asked by one colleague from another, all phones are put away, this technique has empirically demonstrated the positive impact it may have on performance. (Cooper, 2017) Additionally, one more thing management can do when setting their office is properly picked interior and choosing sound absorbing materials over hard surfaces can have surprisingly positive impact on sound absorption. “Overall interior noise levels can be reduced by the extensive use of thick, heavy carpeting, drapes, wall hangings, and acoustical ceiling tiles”. (The Audible Landscape: A Manual for Highway Noise and Land Use, 2017, 50) Lastly, as presented already by the representatives from the studied companies, headphones can help to stay away from noise and be more productive. (Berinato, 2012)

When evaluating phone calls as a distraction, there are two different perspectives that it can be seen from and it is crucial to acknowledge those when seeking a way to deal with this distraction. The first is the perspective of the person who receives the call, since he/she gets distracted from the work he/she was doing. The other perspective is the worker that hears someone else’s phone ringing in the office, who hears the conversation, or who has a colleague receive a phone call during a meeting. As for the worker who gets distracted by a co-worker’s phone there is not too much he/she can do and the most simple and efficient solution would probably be what the studied companies have presented themselves already, wear headphones, so that you do not get distracted by this conversation, since phone call can be treated from this perspective just like a noise distraction. The company may also want to keep different types of workers in different rooms, since a room with multiple workers together has a lot of noise and while one worker has to make a phone call, the other needs silence, thus a conflict may occur. Also, the company may come up with a solution, like one of the studied companies has presented; the phone booth where the worker can go every time he/she has to make a phone call and not let his/her conversation distract anyone. As for the one who accepts/makes this phone call, there are multiple tips that do not eliminate this distraction, but help dealing with it quicker and smarter. For example, one can

- schedule the time he/she would spend on phone calls,



- keep a list of most commonly asked questions at hand,
- provide the e-mail option, (Ward, 2018)
- if you want to make a short call, call right before the lunch time or the time the business closes, or if you want to receive a long answer, or establish a relationship with the business you call, make this call in the middle of the morning or in the afternoon;
- make notes during the call instantly. (Funk, 2015)

In the case of distracting notifications there is not much to say about this, since there are not many solutions and the only way to cope with this is pretty straightforward. If one gets distracted at work by notifications, then he/she should probably turn them off, or at least limit the number of apps on the phone and websites on the computer that are allowed to send these notifications. Anyway, most likely the worker would not probably miss something very important, and even if a crucial thing either for the employee's personal life or for work pops up as a notification, he/she will still see it next time the person checks the phone, which will happen very soon; an average American checks his/her phone every twelve minutes. (Americans check their phones 80 times a day: study, 2017) The other suitable solution is to keep the most important notifications as the person sees for him/herself, but turn the sound off for those notifications. Thus, this notification may be able to distract him/her only when this employee already went on his/her phone, which is frequently a different distraction, since the worker would most likely do a not work-related activity on the phone. (Olmstead, Lampe, and Ellsion, 2016, 6)

As for social media, the common solution the distraction has is a policy that outlines the way social media websites are allowed to be used. However, the companies that bring social media policies not only do it to prevent employees from getting distracted, but they also do it to protect the company image and to ensure that employees do not spread wrong message about the company. (Henricks, 2011) This is a good way to solve two problems with one action. However, the question here is whether the strict approach with policies and regulations would suit the company, especially a very young one. For example, the company Morning star has shown how an enterprise can show fascinating results without strict management setting

pressure on what workers can and cannot do. Instead, the company focuses on providing the opportunity to its workers to manage themselves and have internal motivation instead of management addressing the right attitude. (Hamel, 2011) Although, in a case the company still wants to go for a policy, since it is a common practice, and there is still a certain level of hazard to productivity coming from social media, (Stylianou, 2017) then managers may come up with a policy, which would describe circumstances under which it is better to avoid social media usage. It can be during meetings, active working hours, or a customer interaction. The crucial aspect for such policy is to outline the normative measure that would be taken in a case of not following the rules of the policy. (Managing and Leveraging Workplace Use of Social Media, 2016) The other crucial thing for managers is to lead by a good example, show that the supervisor him/herself follows the policy, so that employees would take it seriously. Lastly, just being kind and polite with your employees would be a good approach, so that there is not too much pressure set with this issue. (Simpson, 2017) As for employees, the one solution that is both obvious and efficient is to control themselves. Staying away from not work-related social media activities, not getting distracted, focus on the task. These simple things can be done by employees themselves and it would improve productivity a lot.

For communication with co-workers based on both related and not related to work activities, one common solution has already been mentioned by one of the companies studied. The representatives from that company did not categorize it precisely, but it was a type of “indicators”. Those were headphones that workers use and the usage of them as a “flag” to show one’s unavailability when a pair is on. Along with that there are many of other types of indicators. For example, the company called Luxafor provides the USB lights that can be placed on one’s computer and that would signal whether the worker is available or not, based on the color of the flag. However, despite all the technological advances that are designed specifically to solve this problem, sometimes simply addressing your problem might be the quickest and easiest solution, when one just lets know his/her colleagues that it is not quite the right moment for a chat. (Seager, 2015) This is the pattern that has been observed many times during this study and might be one of the destinations that modern management would want to reach. In the case employees understand

what distracts them and have the passion to get their tasks completed on time - oftentimes the actions they can take may have a great impact on productivity and would dramatically decrease the probability of getting distracted, compared to possible managerial solutions that would take a lot of resources and supervision and would not necessarily assure the result achieved.

Extra tasks that have been discovered in this study as a distraction, occurring in some start-up companies have already been partly provided with a suitable solution by the company that first helped the researcher discover this distraction. Nevertheless, there are other solutions to this distraction. For example, concierge services or outsourcing could potentially do a good job of eliminating extra tasks quickly and safely to the productivity of the one who would have otherwise been performing this task in the company. Also, it might be the task that the particular employee would not show the best performance at, and it can also take him/her more time than it would for a person who specializes with tasks like this. Therefore, there are concierge services for some of employee's personal not work-related issues (Huang, 1999), and so is there outsourcing for third-party companies to perform an activity the requesting company's employees would normally do. (Outsourcing, 2018) Thus, the company may stay relatively small and not spend too many resources on recruitment and maintaining an extra worker, instead just outsource some tasks from time to time that do not correlate to their employees' specializations, and use concierge services for some happenings in employees' personal lives to not let those drag the productivity down. Also, even though, at first it may seem irrational for start-ups to spend money on outsourcing of something, it may eventually be a better choice to actually save money. (The ultimate guide to outsourcing for startups, 2015) Nevertheless, the most practical and easiest solution to this type of distraction would probably be prioritizing and planning activities for the day or the week. It can help eliminate extra tasks in the first place, which would help save on productivity. (Kennedy, Moats, 1997)

Overall, it can be observed that there are both unusual solutions to some of these distractions that can shape the future workplace into something new. However, some distractions are pretty straightforward, and so are their solutions. The thing management has to do is to encourage employees to solve their distractions by

themselves, since oftentimes it can be easier and cheaper. Meanwhile start-up companies have to do the same thing and try to keep the sustainable pace for their development and maintain healthy atmosphere free from distractions.

## 5 Conclusions

The first thing that is necessary to acknowledge in outcomes of this study is that most of distractions that have been revealed to appear in the studied start-up companies have a tendency to as well occur in big enterprises and their office places. It is not surprising, since

- most of those distractions are quite common nowadays and can occur under various circumstances, not only in an office; (Distraction and Teen Crashes: Even Worse than We Thought, 2015)
- these distractions occur to the similar people who also work in a company. Even though it is a small start-up it still faces those human norms to get distracted sometimes by similar factors, such as communication, social media, or noise.

That explains why distractions found in start-ups are so similar to the ones in big companies. However, speaking of the one that has been proposed in chapter 4.1 to possibly exist solely in a start-up environment (extra tasks); there are always some small differences and unique aspects for each workplace and this is the one that seems to appear only in start-ups, since big companies usually keep their workers with the same tasks consistently. (Office Hours: Working at a startup vs. working at a large, established company, 2017)

Another crucial outcome of the study to point out is seen when all main pieces come together and it is observable, the severity of the impact distractions have on productivity. The other evaluation that can be made is how complex and at the same time simple the topic is. It is very complex in terms of all various types of distractions, where they may come from, what impact they have, what it takes a worker to recover. These things in reality are much deeper than what they had been expected to be before the study. However, simplicity is observed in solutions that help deal

with these distractions, which oftentimes have been very straightforward. Also, simplicity is seen in the way participants treated the distractions. None of them seemed to put a lot of effort into analyzing distractions, mostly they just had the attitude alike “that is distracting, don’t let it distract you”; “get over it”. As for distractions as such, secondary data has shown how often distractions appear in their various types, and the tendency does not seem to go away any time soon. Therefore, it is mandatory for companies to prepare to deal with negative distractions and from the early days of the company’s lifecycle know what can damage the productivity and be aware of some suitable solution to those things.

To summarize the topic, it can be pointed out that we live in a very interesting time. We get lots of innovations, we achieve things that a couple of decades ago we could not even dream about. However, we might have moments where we get stuck with something as simple as a minor distraction. It stops us from achieving better results in all areas of our lives. Are we that submissive? Shouldn’t we be better than that? The author of this study is not only fascinated by all the progress that we as humanity are making, but he wants to be an integral part of this mechanism; to maintain it with minimized number of negative distractions and outstanding productivity. The dream to make our world great and help businesses move us all forward and bring us the great future. Should it remain a dream?

## **6 Discussion**

The conducted study started from a very remote point of productivity and what role it plays in the modern world, and it eventually has lead the whole research to the point where young start-up companies were interviewed on what things they find most distractive at their workplace. Although, the relevance can be outlined and it can be seen why in this study it was worth bringing attention to the final topic. Primarily, since productivity can be decreased because of distractions. (Even Small Distractions Derail Productivity, 2016) Therefore, distractions have been studied specifically in order for modern management to be aware of those factors that can have negative impact on productivity of their units. Afterwards, it brought the study to the point where it was decided to conduct a primary data collection among start-up companies and find out what things they find most distractive at their workplaces.

In the process of this data collection, the relatively small sample can be explained with data saturation that came on surprisingly early stage. The first interviewed company stated various distractions that had already been observed and analyzed via secondary data use. The next company told about the same kinds of distractions they face, as the first company did, which are all similar to the most popular ones for big companies, for the exception of just one new distraction they brought to the table. Whereas, with the third studied company nothing new was revealed in the interview, all distractions mentioned by the third studied company were nothing different from what had been mentioned by other companies-participants. Therefore, it was decided to finish data collection with that amount of information gathered, since going with, for instance, five more interviews would have probably not brought something new to the outcome, but the poll would have still been too narrow for conclusion that could have been strong enough to make statements about guaranteed existence of certain patterns for workplaces. Also, as mentioned earlier in the study, cultural differences should not be underestimated. The data collection was conducted in Finland, but even there each worker in the company has different cultural background, different attitude to work and productivity. Along with that, companies themselves are run by people who have their own beliefs and attitudes, which will eventually impact the way company operates. Also, each company has different activities they do even in office environment. Some of them do programming, some have to write something, some create content, some make calls a lot, and so on. It would take a lot of effort to make statements about Finland alone and what kind of behavior is regular for start-ups here, without even getting started with the whole world and all different cultures and attitudes that exist out there. Although, it was not the aim of the study, the aim was to see start-up companies and find out from them what things are the most distractive to them and based on that, derive a conclusion that would tell about possible tendency that can be seen across various workplaces. This study is a starting point for a deeper research. This can serve as an inspiration for other researchers to narrow down the aim of their studies and find some specific data on various things. They might want to study what impact distractions have on start-ups and compare it to the big companies and how it relates to them, for example. Another study, that would probably consider observation techniques for its methodology, could analyze how

statements employees make about what distracts them differ from what they really get distracted by, during an average working day. Also, more normative studies would be very useful for companies to find what techniques show the best results against certain distractions. Moreover, any familiar study can be narrowed down to a specific region, industry, or even a company, which would be determined by the objectives future researcher will have. Overall, there are lots of things that can be studied based on findings of this study and it can be taken further to disclose more about distractions and their nature.

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