

ENTREPRENEURS

Entrepreneur Diary: Enter The Cone Zone

By Damon Schechter
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Entry by Damon Schechter, Founder and CEO, Shipwire Product Order Fulfillment and a shipping and e-commerce blogger
 After working at a few rapidly growing companies, it comes as no surprise to me that startups are extremely energetic places. It is not just the creative growth. The energy has a lot to do with the type of people attracted to start their own business – energetic, smart, self starters, that can do a lot of different things and plug into the

business in a lot of different ways. These jack-of-all-trades are key hires during the early stages of a company, when your [business plan](#) is still evolving, and you may be doing sales on one day, design the next, HR over lunch and web marketing, or maybe even blog writing, late at night.

Shipwire is no different. The energy around here can really keep you moving, and make the minimal sleep seem practically irrelevant. At Shipwire, it helps the office has a lot of open space so people can communicate easy. Add to that, we have a very tight development schedule with monthly product releases, so the product and software engineering teams are moving quickly.

Marketing and sales is a constant buzz of activity. Our support and operations teams are dealing with growing entrepreneurial [companies](#) that keep us on our toes. It's a busy place, with just the daily needs.

That said, our employees are not super-human and the business needs more than just daily-task management – it needs infrastructure and lots of time planning for growth (read: "world domination").

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What we've noticed, is that we lose a lot of time to interruptions. Drive-by questions. Getting pulled into a fire drill. One of my team members mentioned in passing, when I asked what he was doing, that he was, "managing the current fire-drill." When I asked him what was next, he said, "hopefully some sales, but probably the next fire drill."

Managing based on interruptions is definitely not the way to tackle some of the bigger tasks. That is why I was so impressed, when our new VP of sales noticed his team was entirely too interrupt driven, and came up with a simple solution. The Cone!

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The VP of sales went out to a party supply store and bought a stack of cones. They look like small blue street cones and are fairly obvious, especially when they sit ontop of somebody's monitor or right behind their chair. They are called: "The Don't Bother Me Cone." And the weird thing is, they work. I happened to be talking to one of our team members, in our Merchant Success zone (sales, support and account management)and noticed one of our new hires get jammed up on a support question. I saw him turn to ask a senior team member for help, see the cone next to his desk, give a little shrug, turn back to his desk and log into our team [knowledge base](#) to figure out the answer himself.

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That may sound like a little thing; but it's not. It's a productivity enhancer and it forces people to stop before they interrupt the next person. In an open work environment, it functioned almost like a closed door. It was one of the more effective tricks I've seen in a while. The cone prevented interruptions without crushing the energy and creative flow of the work environment.

What has worked in your company to reduce interruption, and still not stifle creative flow?

Here are some other productivity tips, that I've collected for all you busy entrepreneurs out there:

1. Answer e-mails only at certain times of the day. I think this is another four-hour work week tip.
2. Start the day with the biggest or hardest project; your big rock for the day, that looks hard to move. If you get that done, then all the small tasks will look easy (little rocks).
3. Get to the office early, or stay late a couple days a week.
4. Ride the bus, or take the train. This is not only good for the environment but it's also a good place to work on a project, especially if you have a wireless laptop card.
5. Turn off your cell phone when you're working on a project.
6. Don't open too many Web-browser tabs or [applications](#). Open just enough to complete the task you're on. Many people constantly leave on e-mail, or Skype, or an IM Chat window. That's welcoming an interruption.

About the Author: Damon Schechter is the Founder and CEO of Shipwire Product Order Fulfillment. Damon also blogs about business growth at <http://www.shipwire.com/blog>

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Issamar Ginzberg - business consultant

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Q: Do I need to know anything special if I'm hiring teenagers?

A: Check on child labor laws and safety advice. OSHA has more: http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/teenworkers/small_business.html

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