Interruption Cost Cut

Facilitator guide · make the hidden cost of interruptions undeniable — then cut the two worst sources

Your job: not to produce a number — to make the cost **undeniable**, then get the team to cut sources. The team counts its interruptions for one typical week; you translate that total into capacity it recognises ("that's a person a week"), so the team is finally willing to act. If the session ends at a number everyone nods at, it failed. It must end with a committed cut and an owner.

The one line: the tally is the evidence — the translation is the point. Minutes don't move people; capacity they recognise does.

SAY THIS EARLY — IT KEEPS THE SCEPTICS IN THE ROOM

This tool is **not** trying to eliminate necessary interruptions — some teams (support, incident, ops, customer-facing) are interruption-heavy by design. It separates the **necessary** from the **preventable**, and cuts only the preventable. Say that in the first minute and the most sceptical manager stays with you.

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

- A team that's **"always busy, always slow"** — pulled off important work, nothing big ever finished
- Interruptions each seem reasonable, so no one questions them
- Capacity seems to "vanish" into pings and quick questions
- The cost is real but no one believes it's big

USE ANOTHER TOOL

- Surviving one interruption you can't avoid → **Park It** (protect the re-entry)
- Installing protected focus time → **Attention Boundary System** (prevent them landing)
- The team already knows the cost and wants to prevent it → go straight to **Attention Boundary System**

The one test before you start: does the team believe interruptions are "no big deal" — small, reasonable, part of the job? If yes, this makes the real cost undeniable. If they already know the cost and want to prevent it, this isn't the tool.

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PART 1 RUN IT

everything you need to start

1 · WHAT IS THIS REALLY DOING?

The one idea

THE ONE IDEA

Interruptions are a cognitive blind spot: each one is trivial, so the brain never sums them — and the real cost isn't the interruption, it's the time to get **back into deep work** afterwards. Counting by source makes the aggregate visible; translating it out of minutes makes it **felt**. People don't act on a minutes figure — they act on capacity they recognise.

THE SAME NUMBER, TWO WAYS

WHAT WE COUNTED

163

minutes lost / week

42 interruptions × ~4 min reload

"...huh, OK." a number nobody acts on

translate →

WHAT IT MEANS

≈ 1

full person-day, every single week

= more than our weekly team meeting
= a whole sprint a quarter

"Wait — that's a person."

Don't move on until someone says a version of "wait — that's a person".

2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

Item	What it is, and when it's used
A recent, typical week (core)	One real week the team can recall — the interruptions must be real, not hypothetical.
The tally card (core)	A simple card to log each interruption source, its weekly frequency, and its honest reload time. Counting must be quick; the card keeps it light.
The translation key (core)	Converts the weekly minutes into capacity the team recognises — person-days, sprints, meetings. This is where the reveal lives.
One facilitator	Keeps the count fast, drives the translation, and pushes the team to name cuts — not just admire the number. (Works solo too, but a team is where the reveal bites.)

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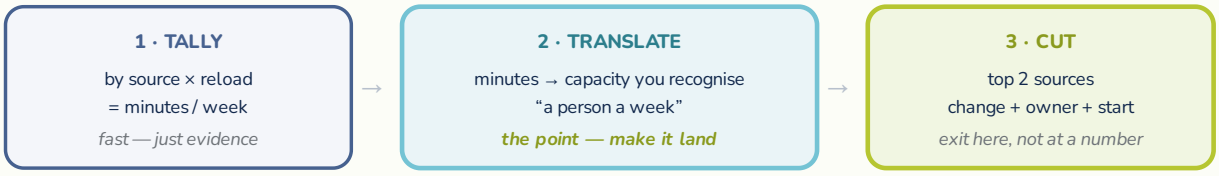
3 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

The run sheet

Brief the team (2 min), then run these in order. Keep the counting **fast** — spend your real time on the translation and the cut.

1 · List the interruptions	**5 min**	"Think of a recent, typical week. What pulled you off your main work?" List the sources — ad-hoc pings, "quick questions", desk drop-ins, unplanned meetings. *Group similar ones — log "ad-hoc pings" as one source, not 42 separate pings.* You're building toward cutting sources.
2 · Count frequency & reload	**6 min**	For each source: how often a week, and *how long before you're properly back into the deep work — not just back at the desk?* Log frequency × reload; tally the total. **Let the reload number be theirs** — never assert a multiplier, or they'll argue it. Their own honest number is unarguable.
3 · Translate	**6 min**	This is the whole tool. Convert the total out of minutes: *"What's that as a share of one person's week? Against our team meeting? Over a quarter?"* Make it visceral, not numerical. Don't move on until someone says a version of "wait — that's a person".
4 · Cut the worst sources	**8 min**	"Which 2 sources cost the most — and what's one change that would cut each?" Pick the top 2 by cost. *For each: a concrete change, an owner, and when it starts.* Commit them. This is the exit — not the number.

COUNT FAST · TRANSLATE HARD · CUT



Spend your time on the translation and the cut — not the counting.

FACILITATOR — THE MOVE THAT MAKES THE TOOL WORK

The count is just raw material. **Do not let the team admire the number.** Drive straight past it to the translation, and keep going until you see the flinch. Watch for these — they mean the reveal is landing:

- someone restates the cost in their own words — "that's a whole day a week?"
- a visible flinch or laugh — the number stopped being abstract
- the room shifts from "interruptions are normal" to "we can't afford this"
- someone names a source unprompted — "it's the Slack pings, isn't it"

That flinch is the reveal. Now move to the cut.

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PART 2 **MAKE IT LAND & MAKE IT STICK** why it works, and what to watch

4 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

The tool rests on one move: turning an invisible total into a felt one. Three choices make it work. **Count by source, not incident** — a list of 42 pings is noise; "ad-hoc pings: 42/week" is a target you can cut. **The team supplies the reload time** — their own honest "time to get back into flow" can't be disputed the way a claimed multiplier can. **Translate out of minutes** — minutes are abstract; "a person a week" is visceral, and that's what converts a number into a reason to change.

5 · WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes

What you'll see	The fix
It becomes a measurement exercise	The one failure mode: 15 minutes counting, a tidy total, everyone nods, nothing changes. The arithmetic isn't the deliverable — the willingness to cut is. If you only have time for the count or the cut, do the cut.
Leading with a multiplier ("interruptions cost 5×")	They'll argue it and you lose the room. Ask them how long it really takes to get back into flow; use their number.
Over-counting	15 minutes of precise arithmetic kills a 20-minute tool. Count fast; the total is just evidence.
Logging incidents, not sources	You can't cut "42 pings"; you can cut "ad-hoc pings". Group from the start.
Stopping at awareness	"Now we know" isn't the job. The job is a committed cut with an owner.

What participants say — and your move

What they say	Your response
"But every interruption is reasonable."	Each one is. Add them up — that's the point. Reasonable and unaffordable aren't opposites.
"It's only a couple of minutes each."	The interruption is. How long till you're properly back in the work? That's the real cost.
"This is just part of the job."	Some of it. But a person a week? Let's cut the two worst and keep the rest.

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“We can’t stop people asking questions.”	We’re not stopping them — we’re batching them. Same answers, a fraction of the cost.

A good run leaves you with:

- ✓ The count was fast — you didn’t let it become an arithmetic exercise
- ✓ The total got translated into capacity the team recognised
- ✓ Someone flinched — “wait, that’s a person”
- ✓ The team committed to cut the top 1–2 sources
- ✓ Each cut has a concrete change and a named owner

6 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

When interruptions feel normal, don’t ask “is this one reasonable?” — ask “what does this cost us in a week, as a share of a person?” Reasonable and unaffordable aren’t opposites.

For a returning team: check whether last time’s cut actually held — did the owner make the change, and did the source shrink? A cut without follow-through quietly comes back.

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Appendix

a worked run · edge cases · where this sits

7 · A WORKED RUN

Watch the facilitator move

Stage	What happened in the room
The count	"Ad-hoc pings ~30/week, 'quick' desk drop-ins ~8, unplanned meetings ~4. Reload? Honestly, 4–5 minutes each to get back in."
The total	"So roughly 163 minutes a week." Someone: "…OK, that's a lot, I guess." *The danger point — a number nobody acts on.*
The translate	Facilitator doesn't stop: "163 minutes — what's that as a share of someone's week? It's almost a full person-day. Every week. More than our team meeting. A whole sprint a quarter."
The flinch	"Wait — that's a person. We're losing a person a week to 'quick questions'?" The room goes quiet. **That's the reveal.**
The cut	"Top source is ad-hoc pings. Change: batch them into two windows, 11am and 4pm. Owner: lead. Starts Monday."

The lesson, not stated but felt: they walked in believing interruptions cost minutes; they left having seen it costs a person a week — and committed to cut the biggest source. The number was just the evidence; the translation did the work.

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8 · EDGE CASES

When the room doesn’t behave

What happens	What to do
The team disputes the reload time	Good — let them set it lower. Even at 2 minutes the total usually still translates to real capacity. Use their number; it’s unarguable.
The total feels small	Translate anyway — and over a quarter or year. A “small” weekly number is often a startling annual one. If it’s genuinely tiny, this isn’t the team’s real blocker — say so.
“We can’t eliminate interruptions — that’s our job” (support, ops)	Agree, and reframe: split the tally into reactive-by-design (protect a focus block around it) versus avoidable (cut those). Often 30–40% is preventable even in reactive teams — that’s the target, and naming it protects the tool’s credibility.
They want to cut everything	Don’t — pick the top 1–2 by cost. A broad “fewer interruptions” resolution dies; two named cuts with owners hold.
It becomes a blame session (“it’s Sales pinging us”)	Redirect to the source and the mechanism, not the people: “how do we batch those requests”, not “who keeps interrupting”.

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9 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

Three tools deal with interruptions — a progression: **diagnose** → **recover** → **prevent**. Start here when the team doesn't yet believe there's a problem.

Tool	Its job — and when to reach for it
Interruption Cost Cut	**Diagnose.** Make the total cost felt, so the team will act — then cut the worst sources.
Park It	**Recover.** Survive an interruption you can't avoid — capture the re-entry in three lines, return in seconds.
Attention Boundary System	**Prevent.** Set a repeatable focus boundary and feel what it protects — stop interruptions landing.

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