

# Why am I stuck in front of my laptop?

*...a headmaster's work consists mainly of interruptions to it. (Keith, 1977, p. III)*

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This a frequently asked question by Senior Leadership Team (SLT) members, hopelessly stuck in their offices rather than leading teaching and learning as they should be doing.

Leading teaching and learning is the most important function of SLT members. It is one way with which SLT members can affect student learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Horng & Loeb, 2010; Murphy, 1987; Robinson et al., 2008), with an effect on student learning that is second only to the quality of teaching (Bodnarchuck, 2016; Hallinger 2010; Lemoine et al., 2014; Shaked 2018).

A recent study, conducted in state secondary schools, has shown that around 3 hours (12%) of SLT members' work time is dedicated to leading teaching and learning each week. This is slightly lower than the local finding of 17.6% (TALIS National Unit, 2018) but within the range of 2% to 17% of international research (e.g. Bhengu et al., 2014; Grissom et al., 2013).

A majority of SLT members (53.8%) identify time – lack of time (76.2%) and time fragmentation (23.8%) - as the most difficult barrier to overcome to increase leadership of teaching and learning.

Time fragmentation, the continuous unsolicited interruptions, to SLT members' work might be the main culprit in their collective time woes. SLT members average 65 interruptions a day, totalling an eye watering average of 2 hours 14 minutes of accumulated interruptions. Just less than half of their workday.

School culture is one of the likeliest culprits of time fragmentation (Owens & Steinhoff 1989 in Thomas & Ayers, 1998). Observations have revealed that 21% of interruptions are started by the SLT itself, 14% by support staff and 11% by clerical staff, all of which constitute a small part of the school population. Teachers, including LSEs, and students produced 18% and 15% of interruptions respectively. 21% of interruptions were produced by externals to the school.

During observations, most interruptions (44%) were dominated with requests for information that is normally already available in the school environment: on school noticeboards, assemblies, school calendar, in school policy booklets, MEYR circulars, national policies and work contracts.

Staff requesting direction on their work on common sense issues which are directed through various policies and communications accounted for 34% of interruptions. Urgent requests, that absolutely couldn't wait accounted for 0%.

## **What can we do about this?**

**Individual school members** need to understand what is urgent and not, which channel shall be used for communication – email, phone, face to face..., and to which extent they can take decisions without consulting their next in line supervisor.

**Schools as an organisation** need to clarify where someone needs to call to be serviced, outline in school policy the prioritization and channelling of different information and highlight where information is to be found.

Most importantly these behaviours must be modelled by SLT members, with different staff members or students being directed to the proper person to receive service, rather than being serviced anyways.

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