Read the following article and underline the important points. Then answer the questions.

SUMMARY: Distraction at the office is hardly new, but as screens multiply and managers push frazzled workers to do more with less, companies say the problem is worsening and is affecting business. Consider the importance of work specifications and the contribution of work layout and procedures to productivity as you read.

http://live.wsj.com/video/distracted-on-the-job-firms-look-to-focus-workers/FCEF0F79-B063-4559-B546-2E78E33146FF.html#!FCEF0F79-B063-4559-B546-2E78E33146FF

Workplace Distractions: Here's Why You Won't Finish This Article

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By RACHEL EMMA SILVERMAN

Open-plan offices provide many distractions. Above, Zynga employees working in San Francisco in 2011.

In the few minutes it takes to read this article, chances are you'll pause to check your phone, answer a text, switch to your desktop to read an email from the boss's assistant, or glance at the Facebook or Twitter messages popping up in the corner of your screen. Off-screen, in your open-plan office, crosstalk about a colleague's preschooler might lure you away, or a co-worker may stop by your desk for a quick question.

And bosses wonder why it is tough to get any work done.

Distraction at the office is hardly new, but as screens multiply and managers push frazzled workers to do more with less, companies say the problem is worsening and is affecting business.

While some firms make noises about workers wasting time on the Web, companies are realizing the problem is partly their own fault.

Even though digital technology has led to significant productivity increases, the modern workday seems custom-built to destroy individual focus. Open-plan offices and an emphasis on collaborative work leave workers with little insulation from colleagues' chatter. A ceaseless tide of meetings and internal emails means that workers increasingly scramble to get their "real work" done on the margins, early in the morning or late in the evening. And the tempting lure of social-networking streams and status updates make it easy for workers to interrupt themselves.

"It is an epidemic," says Lacy Roberson, a director of learning and organizational development at eBay Inc. At most companies, it's a struggle "to get work done on a daily basis, with all these things coming at you," she says.

Office workers are interrupted—or self-interrupt—roughly every three minutes, academic studies have found, with numerous distractions coming in both digital and human forms. Once thrown off track, it can take some 23 minutes for a worker to return to the original task, says Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, who studies digital distraction.

Companies are experimenting with strategies to keep workers focused. Some are limiting internal emails—with one company moving to ban them entirely—while others are reducing the number of projects workers can tackle at a time.

Last year, Jamey Jacobs, a divisional vice president at Abbott Vascular, a unit of health-care company Abbott Laboratories, learned that his 200 employees had grown stressed trying to squeeze in more heads-down, focused work amid the daily thrum of email and meetings.

"It became personally frustrating that they were not getting the things they wanted to get done," he says. At meetings, attendees were often checking email, trying to multitask and in the process obliterating their focus.

Part of the solution for Mr. Jacobs's team was that oft-forgotten piece of office technology: the telephone.

Mr. Jacobs and productivity consultant Daniel Markovitz found that employees communicated almost entirely over email, whether the matter was mundane, such as cake in the break room, or urgent, like an equipment issue.

The pair instructed workers to let the importance and complexity of their message dictate whether to use cellphones, office phones or email. Truly urgent messages and complex issues merited phone calls or in-person conversations, while email was reserved for messages that could wait.

Workers now pick up the phone more, logging fewer internal emails and say they've got clarity on what's urgent and what's not, although Mr. Jacobs says staff still have to stay current with emails from clients or co-workers outside the group.

Ms. Roberson of eBay recently instituted a no-device policy during some team meetings, a change that she says has made gatherings more efficient.

Not all workplace distractions harm productivity. Dr. Mark found that people tended to work faster when they anticipate interruptions, squeezing tasks into shorter intervals of time. Workers' accuracy suffered little amid frequent interruptions, but their stress rose significantly.

Other studies have found that occasional, undemanding distractions, such as surfing the Web, can help increase creativity and reduce workplace monotony, which may help boost alertness.

Within Intel Corp.'s 14,000-person Software and Services group, workers were concerned that they weren't getting time to think deeply about problems because they spent much of their time keeping up with day-to-day tasks. So earlier this fall, managers decided to pilot a program allowing employees to block out several hours a week for heads-down work.

During four weekly hours of "think time"—tracked via group calendar and spreadsheet—workers aren't expected to respond to emails or attend meetings, unless it's urgent, or if they're working on collaborative projects.

Already, at least one employee has developed a patent application in those hours, while

Out of Focus | Modern workplace distractions are piling up

others have caught up on the work they're unable to get to during frenetic workdays, says Linda April, a manager in the group.

Dozens of software firms have developed products to tame worker inboxes, ranging from task-management software to programs that screen and sort email, but their effectiveness is limited without organizational change.

Perhaps no company has taken on

the email problem with as much relish as Atos, a global IT services company based outside of Paris, with 74,000 employees.

After an internal study found that workers spent some two hours a day managing their inboxes, the company vowed to phase out internal email entirely.

Workers can still use email with outside customers, but managers have directed workers to communicate with colleagues via an internal social network, which the company began installing earlier this fall, says Robert Shaw, global program director for the "Zero Email" initiative.

Atos says it's too early to say whether the experiment is a success, but in an anti-email manifesto posted on the company's website, CEO Thierry Breton compares his company's efforts to reduce digital clutter to "measures to reduce environmental pollution after the industrial revolution."

Office workers aren't the only ones struggling to stay on-task.

At Robins Air Force Base, in Georgia, fewer than half of planes were being repaired on time by the Warner Robins Air Logistics Complex because employees were working on too many planes at once and toggling between too many tasks on each.

The base worked with Realization, a San Jose, Calif., project-management consulting and software firm, to reduce the number of aircraft in work in the maintenance docks. For example, with one type of aircraft, they reduced the average number in work to six from 11.

Fewer projects led to better focus and more on-time results. A year after changing workflow, 97% of the aircraft are now repaired on time, says Doug Keene, vice director of the air-logistics complex.

Businesses have praised workers for multitasking, "but that isn't necessarily a good thing," says Mr. Keene. "When you are focused on just a few things, you tend to solve problems faster. You can't disguise the problem by looking like you're really busy."

Workplace Distractions Article Questions:

1. Explain the conundrum between a workplace that encourages collaboration and productivity. Are these mutually exclusive? Justify your response.

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2. The article mentions the distraction of email. Is email value-added or non-value added? What priority does email usually take at a worker's desk? What priority should it take? How can managers structure the work environment to encourage appropriate behaviors?

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   Debate the issue of "multitasking" with your classmates. Can a worker truly multitask; work on two projects simultaneously? When working on two projects, will it take longer to complete them simultaneously or sequentially? Justify your response with examples.

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3. The article explains how work environments are increasingly distracting. Create a detailed log of your day; record every activity in which you are involved, citing when distractions were encountered. Measure your total productive time. Another day, ignore distractions, staying focused on your primary tasks and reserving limited time during the day to answer email and perform other routine tasks. Armed with this data, how could you restructure your own work to become more productive?

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4. The article mentions how several companies are striving to reduce workplace distractions. What could your company do to limit or reduce the distractions encountered by your employees? Have a variety of employees record the categories of distractions they encounter and the time spent being distracted. Use a Pareto diagram to determine the primary categories of distraction. What policies can you implement that are targeted at these categories of distraction?

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