

Protect the Critical Step from Interruptions

Todd Jerome Jenkins | v1.0 | Reviewed October 9, 2026 | Discussion + field checks

Why this matters

A quick question can arrive between a check and its record, or between reading an instruction and carrying it out. Protecting that short part of the task helps the worker keep the sequence clear. The arrangement must still let an urgent warning through and provide a reliable restart if interruption happens.

Objective: Set up protected attention, a working alternate contact and a clear recovery method for one important step in today's task.

Key hazards or failure points

Routine calls during a critical check; several people assigning work; ignored warnings; a sign without an alternate contact; an interruption hidden from the next worker; restarting from memory.

Practical controls

- Identify the specific step needing protected attention and agree its start and finish with the leader. Route routine requests to a named alternate who understands the assignment and is available now.
- Use a visible, understood indication that the step is in progress, suited to the workplace. Keep required alarms, stop signals, monitoring and emergency access effective. Do not silence safety communications to reduce interruptions.
- Agree the task's safe pause and restart method before beginning. If interrupted, maintain required protection, preserve an accurate status record and resolve the next authorized step before continuing.

Verify It in the Field

With no hazardous work underway, ask someone to route a routine practice request through the alternate. Confirm it reaches that person without disturbing the simulated critical step. Record the contact, actual response and time; correct uncovered periods or conflicting assignments.

Review how an urgent warning still reaches the worker. Use an announced, harmless communication check under the site's practice rules, without activating a real emergency alarm. Confirm the responsible role understands the immediate response and record any communication gap.

Use a paper task example to pause between an action and its completion record. Ask the worker to show how incomplete status remains visible and who resolves an uncertain restart. Compare the answer with the governing procedure, then record the agreed method and checker.

Stop and reassess

Hold the affected step if attention protection or necessary monitoring is unavailable, the alternate cannot be reached or the work status is uncertain after an interruption. Respond to urgent warnings immediately under the task plan. Restore a verified starting point before resuming.

Ask the crew

1. Which part of today's task is hardest to resume accurately?
2. Who takes routine requests while that step is underway?
3. How will an urgent warning still reach us?

Use the task plan and required specialist decisions before exposure.

Sources: DOE-HDBK-1028-2009 Vol. 2, p. 31; HSE human-factors guidance. Full references and scope: webpage..

Free next step: [JHA/JSA planning & field-verification worksheet](#)

Expanded guidance and separate forms: toddjeromejenkins.com/toolbox-talks/critical-step-interruptions-safe-restart

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