

At Your BEST

on and off the job

June 1996

TOOLS FOR MANAGING WORK AND PERSONAL LIFE

One Thing at a Time

How often at work do you try to answer the phone, work on the computer, open mail, respond to someone's sticking their head in the door—all at once? That's called *multi-tasking*. It's easy to fall into the trap. But the end result? You suffer from a misdirected sense of urgency—and, unlike the computer, you're going to do an unsatisfactory job.

You work best when you focus on one task at a time. Maybe you already know this, but when is the last time you *practiced* it? Try the following exercises to help you become a master of doing one thing at a time:

- **Observe the people in your organization who concentrate well.** What do they do differently from the rest? Talk to them; learn from them.
- **Stick to the main task.** If you're surrounded by various tasks competing for your attention, identify

the main task and stay with it until completion—or for as long as you can.

● **Sometimes is better than never.** If you are *paid* to handle multiple tasks, practice giving at least short bursts of your full attention to the task at hand, before turning to something else that begs your attention. Ever notice how airline reservation attendants in a high-pressure situation deal with one person or situation at a time, often not even raising their heads from the computer monitor? Try it.

● **Practice at home.** If you're reading in your favorite armchair, promise yourself to go 10 minutes without eating any munchies the first night. The next night go 15, then 20, and so forth. This will reinforce your efforts to focus on *work-related* tasks one at a time. ★

(Advice from Jeff Davidson, author of *Breathing Space*.)