

Multi-Tasking Mutes Performance

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As the Internet, mobile devices, and a myriad of other technological wonders become increasingly integrated into our lives, it gets harder and harder to concentrate on any single item. Everywhere you look, you are besieged by competing demands for your time and attention, commanding you to practice multitasking. "Answer the phone." "Click here." "Push here." "Open me." "Switch me on." "Do it all at once!"

Equally unfortunate, multi-tasking is often promoted to as a way for us to meet the complex demands of our modern society and accomplish more in the same amount of time. Have you ever attempted to work on a presentation, while cruising the Internet, or talking on the phone? You don't accomplish much, and time mysteriously disappears.

No Useful Pay Off

HR professionals find themselves perpetually attempting to do many things at once. Yet, attempting to do many things simultaneously can actually have the opposite effect; it makes your work less efficient and contributes to stress. No matter what analogies or metaphors you might have heard, a human being is not a computer. Computers can multitask with ease; the Windows operating system, for example, is capable of running any number of programs without sacrificing accuracy or peace of mind. While there are some low level tasks in which you can multi-task, such as eating and watching television, for sales pros multi-tasking is an idea whose time should never have come.

Alas it's all too easy to fall into a familiar trap: "So much is expected of me, I have to double and triple my activities." Nevertheless, if you attempt to multitask at home or on the job you're likely mess up something in your day or week. Research shows that multi-tasking seldom enables people to accomplish more, if you take the long-term view. A study published by the American Psychological Association's Journal of Experimental Psychology, Human Perception and Performance, found that the effects of multi-tasking can actually be counterproductive.

The primary cost of multi-tasking is, ironically, the very thing that career professionals are desperate to save – time. Multi-tasking is not only ineffective, it's also potentially dangerous. Concentrating on a distant phone call inevitably detracts from a driver's ability to focus on the road, putting them at dire risk of injury. Several recent studies have found that cell phone use while driving leads to an increased risk of automobile accidents.

Attending to the Task at Hand

So how are you supposed to fit in all of your daily tasks without getting so stressed out or frustrated that you cannot finish any? The answer is: less is more.

Science has shown that your brain works best when it gives sharp attention in one direction. Therefore, the key is to focus on the task at hand and be present in the moment. Sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? If you doubt that this is sound advice, then you can set up an easy test right in your own office!

Think of three easy tasks, such as drawing twenty stars on a piece of paper, linking twenty paper clips, and stacking twenty pennies. Then, set up a race with a friend or family member. One person must proceed through the tasks sequentially, taking each assignment to completion before moving on. The other person has to rotate among the three tasks, doing three or four stars, two or three paperclips, and then three or four pennies.

All other things being equal, who is going to win every time? The person who doesn't switch tasks frequently will be the winner. There is no greater efficiency than focusing on the task at hand and giving it your full concentration. As a friend of mine succinctly sums it up: focus beats brilliance.

One Thing a Time

When an airline flight is canceled and people rush to the reservation desk and scramble to catch the next plane or some other connection, does the gate agent attempt to take on five or ten people at a time? No. He or she looks at the computer and handles a particular customer's rerouting, looking up only sparingly. The attendant is not fazed by a 20-person line because it is clearly practical to proceed through it one customer at a time.

Suppose you are continually interrupted by the phone whenever you try to work at your PC. You cannot do your best work because when the phone rings you lose your concentration and focus. How can you handle that situation so that both jobs get the best of your attention? The key is a process called mental completion.

When the phone rings while you are working on your computer, silently recognize yourself by thinking, "I acknowledge myself for coming this far on this project." Then save the work on your screen and turn to the phone. Give the caller your complete and undivided attention; take notes, even smile into the phone. Do whatever you need to do in order to be successful on that phone call. Then, at the conclusion of the call, put the phone down, acknowledge yourself for handling it, and finally turn back to your PC and begin again.

The process of giving yourself a mental completion on all tasks, or even thoughts, sets up a mental partition. You gain more energy, more focus and more direction for your next task.

Focus and Win

If you can continually hone and refine your powers of concentration you'll do a better job and have more time at the end of the day. Both your commissions and your peace of mind will improve.