

## Forsaking Multi-tasking for Your Own Good

In this issue...

By Jeff Davidson

When you attempt to do two or more things at one time, you are multi-tasking and, unfortunately, you're more likely to do unsatisfactory work.

Researchers at the Medical College of Wisconsin have found that if you perform as simple a task as tapping your foot, you activate the primary motor cortex in your brain. If your task is more involved—for instance, if it includes planning in order to tap your foot to a sequence such as one-two, one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three—then two secondary motor areas in the front portion of the brain are engaged. You are drawing upon more of your brain's functioning capacity.

Don't worry, your brain can handle it. The point is that when you engage in multi-tasking (i.e., attempting to watch TV while eating, or doodling while you talk on the telephone) your brain functioning changes to incorporate the extra activities.

"Men give me some credit for genius. All the genius I have lies in this: When I have a subject at hand I study it profoundly. Day and night it is before me. I explore it in all its bearings. My mind becomes pervaded with it. Then the effort which I have made is what people are pleased to call the fruit of genius. It is instead the fruit of labor and thought."

Alexander Hamilton

### Own Good

*Words from the Wise*

*"In spite of warnings,  
nothing much happens  
until the status quo  
becomes more painful  
than change."*

- Laurence J. Peter

If you want to do the best at whatever you're doing, allow your brain to concentrate on one activity — focus on one thing at a time. It sounds simple enough, but this advice goes against the grain of a society telling you do many things at once in order to be more efficient. People double their activities in an effort to make things easier and better.

### **What is Your Hurry?**

Consider some of the greatest people in history, such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Were they in a hurry? They acted urgently because the things they did were important, but they did not walk faster, talk faster, or try to do any of the things you do today in the name of efficiency. They had mastered the art of doing one thing at a time. I sometimes do a little exercise when speaking at conventions and executive retreats. I ask audience members to take out their watches and do nothing but stare at them for a solid minute. No one can do it! In this society, we're fed a message that emphasizes the importance of motion and activity.

When you read, think, or reflect, you "don't look busy" enough. Has the following ever happened to you? Somebody walks by your desk and, horror of horrors, you're reading! Worse yet, you're reading the newspaper! Maybe the person looks at you a little funny, or perhaps you feel a bit guilty because you're not "in motion." Yet studies show that people in executive positions need to read two to four hours each day. To be as productive as you need to be, you often act in ways that run counter to what society tells you is "productive activity."

You have to break out of the mindset imposed by others. Sometimes the best way to be productive is to sit at your desk and do nothing — at least nothing that looks like anything to people walking by. Reading or looking out the window in contemplation could be the single most important and productive thing you do in a day. Too often, you probably throw your time away at tasks when what you really need to do is reflect on them first.

The single best way to cope with a number of different projects is to begin working on one thing until its completion, then go on to the next project, and then the next, until you are finished.

### **Focus on Just One Task**

What happens when you jump between different projects? It may feel dynamic — after all, you're exerting lots of energy. Yet there's a loss of productivity. You and a friend can test this easily at your desk or table. Decide on any three minor tasks in which the two of you can engage simultaneously. For example, one task could be stacking pennies, another could be drawing 15 stars on a blank sheet of paper, and yet another could be linking paper clips together. You each have the same number of items.

You and your friend both engage in these tasks. You stack a few pennies at a time, make a few stars on a blank piece of paper, and link some paper clips, indiscriminately alternating between the three tasks.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, your friend stacks an equal number of pennies to completion until he has no more. Then he turns to making stars on a page, and reaches 15. Finally he turns to linking paper clips, and finishes linking all of them.

Who do you think will not only finish faster and easier, but be in better shape mentally and emotionally? Without question, your friend. Why? He was able to focus on the task at hand, take it to completion, then turn to the next one, while you were bouncing back and forth between activities. You may have been more prone to errors, such as knocking over one of your stacks of pennies. Though you handled the situation well and were quite adept, you simply couldn't keep pace. The quality of your work was not as good. Perhaps your work was not as precise, or the 15 stars you drew on the page left a little to be desired in terms of artistic merit.

Multiply what happens in a simple test such as this by what happens all day and all year long when you flip-flop between activities, and it's easy to understand why you're not getting the best of your activities. Mentally switching from task to task is not as productive as staying on one job until completion.

### **Give Yourself a Break**

For today, give yourself the benefit of working on one thing at a time. You may have to switch gears when the boss comes in, when that important phone call comes through, or if you receive an e-mail that has to be acted on right away. When you switch gears, switch them entirely. Give your complete and undivided attention to the pressing issue at hand. This is the most effective way to work, and you will be happy.

If you notice yourself falling into patterns that resemble multi-tasking, try these solutions:

- Take a 15-minute break once during the morning, and once in the afternoon.
- Don't eat at your desk; get away so that you can recharge your battery.
- Invest in equipment or technology that offers you a significant return, (i.e., pays for itself within one year or less, or saves at least two hours a week of your time).
- Hold regular meetings with your team to discuss how everyone can be more efficient – without multi-tasking. Focus on the big picture of what everyone is trying to accomplish. Often, new solutions to problems will emerge and activities that seem urgent can be viewed from a broader perspective.
- Furnish your offices with plants, pictures, art, or decorations that inspire creativity.

### **About the Author**

*Jeff Davidson, CMC, MBA, is The Work-Life Balance Expert<sup>®</sup>. A speaker at many large companies, Jeff believes that career professionals today in all industries have a responsibility to achieve their own sense of work-life balance. He supports this quest through his websites [www.BreathingSpace.com](http://www.BreathingSpace.com) and [www.Work-LifeBalance.net](http://www.Work-LifeBalance.net). Jeff can be reached at [jeff@breathingspace.com](mailto:jeff@breathingspace.com)*