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One Thing at a Time Yields the Best Results

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By Jeff Davidson

Every day, you engage in some form of multitasking. This might feel temporarily satisfying, but multitasking cannot compete with the long-term productivity of handling one thing at a time.

To become a master of doing one thing at a time, pick an activity that you enjoy, and where there's a high probability that you can engage in that activity without doing anything else. It could be driving your car with the radio off, or reading in your favorite armchair without having any snack. Here are a few tips to get you started:

- Start with small segments. If you're reading in your favorite armchair, promise yourself you'll go ten minutes without any snacks the first night. On the second night go 15 minutes, then 20 minutes, and so forth. Eventually you may get to the point where you can read for an hour or more without having to resort to snacks. I know, you like to read and have snacks, but this is a practice run. Your ultimate goal will be to focus on work-related tasks one at a time, so that your concentration and quality of performance goes up, your anxiety level goes down, and the clock slows down.
- If you're trying to engage in reading, conceptual or breakthrough thinking, or creative problem solving, find as quiet a place as possible. The old argument you gave your parents when you were studying in high school—the one about the radio helping you to do better—is for the birds.
- If you're surrounded by various types of tasks competing for your attention, identify the one that's most important to tackle and stay with it until completion, or for as long as you can. If you're temporarily pulled away by something else, return to the important task at hand, and again stay with it to completion, or for as long as you can.
- If you are paid to simultaneously handle a number of items competing for your attention, practice the ability to give at least short bursts of your full attention to one task at hand before turning away to something else that begs your attention.

Best Results

Words from the Wise

"Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."

- George Bernard
Shaw

Fly Me

If you've ever noticed airline reservation attendants in the middle of a pressure situation, you know what I mean. Suppose the plane is going to be leaving in a matter of minutes and several passengers have arrived late. Rather than trying to deal with three or four passengers at the same time, the ticket agent deals with one person and ticket situation at a time, often not even raising his head from the computer screen. He is ensuring the ticket will be correct once it's printed.

The same observation can be made of a bank teller, a bus driver, or a construction worker walking on scaffolding five stories high. Indeed, when you look around, you find all kinds of people who are adept at doing one thing at a time.

Here are more supporting steps:

- Initiate personal balancing techniques. Take deep breaths, stare out the window, envision yourself tackling the situation easily, or close your eyes for a few seconds before confronting the task again.
- Observe the people in your organization who concentrate well. What do they do different than the rest? Talk to them, learn from them.
- If it's necessary, bring earplugs to work. Use a sound screen if it helps.
- Let others in on your crusade to increase your powers of concentration.

When It's Okay to Double Up On Activities

You need to disengage in multitasking far more frequently than you know. However, there are times when it's perfectly permissible to do more than one thing at a time. Most of those times occur away from work. Obviously, at dinner with a friend or loved one you'll be talking and eating simultaneously. Generally, it's okay to drive and listen to the radio, CDs, or your iPod. The exception is when the decibel level is so high that your concentration is impaired.

The issue becomes foggy when it comes to using a cell phone or smoking. Both have the potential to diminish your concentration and increase your probability of being involved in an accident. Some people argue that cell phones come with speakers, so you can hold a phone conversation while keeping both hands on the wheel.

The problem with being engaged in conversation and performing other tasks is that speaking requires far more brain activity than the passive act of listening to the radio or a CD player. If you insist on engaging in conversations with your cell phone while in the car, perhaps it's best for you to pull off to the side of the road.

Exercising with an iPod is not terrible, but it's not the greatest. I was at my health club recently and was amused by a lady who was not only on the stair climber with an iPod, but she also pulled out a book and proceeded to read it. I almost asked her if she wanted to chew some gum to see if she could do four things at once.

The physical exercises in which you engage are ideally their own reward. Still, I know many people who use workout exercise DVDs, or get on a stationary bike while watching a movie or sports on television. It seems to work well for them, so there's probably no real harm.

You may think you need to be entertained or constantly active. This is not true. The more often you can get into the habit of doing one thing at a time, the better you'll do, and the more time will slow down for you.

About the Author

Jeff Davidson, CMC, MBA, is The Work-Life Balance Expert®. 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 and www.Work-LifeBalance.net. Jeff can be reached at jeff@breathingspace.com.