

Multitasking Devastates Efficiency

Contributed by Steve Marr
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However, true multitasking actually kills output rather than helping create it, and this has profound ramifications on our overall effectiveness on the job.

We are required to engage successfully in a multitude of tasks, such as answering the phone, responding to e-mails, writing letters, ordering merchandise, writing staff reviews, or reviewing customer proposals. Yes, we need to do all these things, and more, but we can't effectively do two of these things simultaneously.

Talking with a customer on the phone while reading and replying to e-mails is an example. When we allow our customer to drift away in our thoughts while focusing on e-mails, we can lose the most critical part of the conversation or make a blunder in deleting the wrong e-mail message or send off a reply that needed to be far more thorough. Other examples are driving while talking on the phone or listening to a string of phone messages while signing purchase orders.

Paul wrote, "I
box in such a way, as not beating the air..."

(1 Corinthians 9:26). A boxer needs 100% focus, 100% of the time. The fighter needs to watch the opponent, change directions, and be ready to deflect blows or strike an opportune right hook. Any loss of concentration will create a tremendous opportunity for the opponent.

Jesus said, "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other" (Luke 16:13, emphasis mine). When we are doing something, that task becomes our master, so to speak, at least for that moment.

Try a little home test. Ask your spouse or a friend to watch the news with you for 15 minutes. Watch all the news trailers at the bottom and listen carefully to the news stories. Then have the other person ask you 10 questions relating to the trailers or news stories, without telling you in advance which type of information will be on the quiz. You will likely miss several answers. Then repeat the process, but this time focus on either the news or the trailers and then have another quiz. Most of us will do far better the second time.

Another problem with multitasking is that we constantly change focus, and with every change we lose time. Dr.'s Joshua Rubinstein and David Meyer wrote a study published by the American Psychological Association that determined everyone loses time refocusing when shifting from one task to another. The more complex the task, the more time is needed to get refocused, which costs us productivity. It does not enhance productivity.

The study did validate the common-sense notion that we lose less time when we switch between tasks we know well and that we lose more time when switching between unfamiliar work. However, the reality is that we lose time either way. When we have to stop and refocus, we lose time and are not as productive as we can be.

And it's not an age issue. This re-focusing and losing time and productivity is true for all age groups, not just the over fifty crowd. A call from a key customer or an urgent question from a colleague will require that we respond and then refocus. We can't stop all interruptions, but we can control many of those interruptions.

Some activities we can and should do at the same time do not require us to re-focus. We can respond to e-mail after we have started to print a long document or we can read the newspaper while eating. A machine operator can load one piece of equipment while another is operating, like we can load the washing machine and then move on to something else. The more often we combine these tasks, efficiency increases.

Make a list of 3-4 things you tend to do at the same time and then check yourself when you start crossing that line. When I write, I ignore my incoming e-mails, despite the temptation to see what's coming in, because each "look" costs me productivity.

While avoiding multitasking whenever possible, we actually get more done. After all, at work we need to produce results, not just a flurry of activity. Then as Paul wrote, you will get results, not just beating air.