

MULTITASKING: ATTENTION AT HALF MAST

[GLOBE & MAIL UPDATE]

by Wallace Immen

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When Jeane Jorgensen used to check her e-mail at the same time as she was talking on the phone, she'd often forget what she'd told the caller by the time she hung up.

And because she hadn't paid full attention to the e-mails, either, she'd have to go back and re-read them.

"I was continually under stress and ended up being angry at myself. I'd feel badly that other people were able to multitask, but I couldn't do it," says the Toronto-based freelance communications specialist. "I would sometimes just feel lost."

Lots of people may boast about their ability to multitask, but it's becoming clear that, for many of them, such juggling is a false economy, career experts say.

"It became a management fad and it sounds great if you've got an ever-increasing workload to try to do two things at once but, in fact, it turns out you're getting less done overall," Toronto career coach Robert Steinbach says.

"When you're dividing your attention on two tasks, you're not really present for either."

In fact, by trying to do two things at once, you're really compressing the amount of information your brain can access for either task.

That's backed up by a study last April of 1,000 office workers, commissioned by Hewlett-Packard Co., which found the distraction of checking e-mail or text messaging while doing another task can cause someone's IQ to drop between 5 and 15 per cent.

"The impairment only lasts for as long as the distraction. But you have to ask whether our current obsession with constant communication is causing long-term damage to concentration and mental ability," says Dr. Glenn Wilson, a personality specialist at the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of London who led the study.

The real problem in multitasking "is resuming work after a distraction," adds Dave Crisp, president of leadership coaching company Crisp Strategies Inc. in Toronto.

Without a strategy for recalling what you have done, you'll end up wasting a lot of time retracing your steps to get back on track, he says.

That can mean hours lost every day, conclude researchers Victor Gonzalez and Gloria Mark in the computer science school at the University of California at Irvine.

Following 36 corporate technology and finance employees in Southern California through typical office work days, they found that workers could seldom go more than 11 minutes before being interrupted by a phone call, urgent e-mail or discussion with a colleague they tried to handle at the same time.

But once their focus was shifted, it took them an average of 25 minutes to get back on track with the original task.

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The researchers calculated that interruptions that require a shift of focus consume an average of 2.1 hours of every working day, or 28 per cent of the average person's routine, according to their report, published in September.

The problem is growing by the day. An increasing demand for productivity has multiplied the number of tasks that employees must juggle. At the same time, a profusion of communications gadgets vie for attention.

Mr. Steinbach says it is better to focus on one task at a time and see it through to completion. "You'll find you get it done a lot faster than if you try to think through two things at once."

But very few are lucky enough to have only one project requiring attention at any given time, and interruptions are a given. So how do you put the other things out of your mind?

Mr. Steinbach suggests breaking down big projects into smaller tasks, which he calls "action steps." An action step is something that is physical and measurable, like answering an e-mail or taking a phone call.

With a big project, like developing an annual budget, there may be dozens of action steps, such as setting a meeting date, booking a boardroom and getting messages out to the people who should attend. Try to see each step through to completion before moving on to another, he suggests.

"This makes a big project mentally compact," he says.

More importantly, doing steps in sequence helps you keep your place.

He notes that it is helpful to write them down as a checklist. That may take a few minutes but the effort will pay its way in the time saved keeping track of where you are in the process of completing each project, Mr. Steinbach says.

As well, if a task is something that can be done in under two minutes, do it immediately, he advises. If it is going to take more time, book a time in your calendar to complete it.

And be methodical about holding to your schedule, Mr. Steinbach insists.

"There's where most multitaskers fail. We literally don't value our own time as much as we do the time of our clients and managers, and that makes it easy to be distracted. You've got to negotiate time with yourself and refuse to be distracted for that time."

You also have to train your colleagues not to expect you to drop everything whenever a new task arises. "If you are always available, people will come to expect that you will give up your time," he says.

That can be as simple as saying for instance, that you are not to be interrupted between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

"It doesn't mean you aren't available; it just means you are temporarily not available. People will alter their behaviour accordingly."

Mr. Crisp recommends keeping e-mail and voice messages in their place. Set aside a time or two through the day to check them and decide which, if any, need an answer. They will be there later if you don't get to them immediately.

But remember that people should have priority over technology, Mr. Crisp says. At a previous job as a vice-president of Hudson's Bay Co., Mr. Crisp says that he would get so wrapped up reading e-mails and answering voice

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and text messages that he realized staff were afraid to approach him in the morning.

He put a note next to his computer telling him to "keep people first. That reminded me that if someone came in with an immediate matter, I had to put the voice mail down and smile at them and give them full attention."

Ms. Jorgenson says she has learned to focus on only one task, and no longer talks and reads at the same time. She has gone further by organizing the papers she needs into separate folders in a file rack that she keeps away from her desk so she won't be distracted by it.

Each day she sets down on paper her agenda, marking off what must be immediately completed, what can wait, and her progress. And when she changes tasks, she takes a couple of moments to serve as transition time.

By doing all that, she finds she has actually freed up time, giving her the flexibility to turn to any immediate last minute-requests that inevitably crop up.

Overall, she feels much more efficient and in control.

"The difference is incredible," she says. "It's a great feeling."

Wallace Immen

HOW TO STAY FOCUSED

Multitasking can turn into multi-frustration, the experts say. Here are their tips for staying focused amid the clutter of competing demands for your attention:

Cut up the completion pie. Divide tasks into pieces that you can finish each day, because worrying about incomplete actions consumes energy.

Keep track of progress. At the beginning of a project, outline all the steps you need to take. This will give you a template for knowing where you are along the way.

Rethink meetings. Examine the need for such gatherings and who has to attend. With technology, you can make your point or get the highlights of a meeting without actually sitting through an hour of something that is strictly informational.

Clean up. Get rid of clutter on your desk and organize e-mail. Piles of stuff can make you feel overwhelmed; getting rid of them can be liberating.

Keep e-mail messages and replies short. Write them in bite-sized pieces and make it clear what kind of response you require, if any.

Block out time. Set aside an uninterrupted amount of time morning and evening to check e-mails. Don't check outside those windows.

Bookmark. Before you leave an unfinished task, make a mental or physical bookmark of where you left off and what the next step should be.

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