

Multi-tasking: Time Saver or Time Waster?

All too often, in too many magazine and articles, multi-tasking is promoted as an efficient way to meet the complex demands of our information and communication overload society and accomplish more in the same amount of time. Have you ever attempted to work on a document, however, while cruising the internet or talking on the phone? You don't accomplish much, and time mysteriously disappears. Worse, often you feel as if you haven't done your best.

In both your personal and professional life, attempting to do many things simultaneously can actually have the opposite effect; it makes your work less efficient and contributes to stress, and, maddeningly, it leads to more multi-tasking.

A human being is not a computer. Computers can multi-task with ease; the operating system is capable of running any number of programs without sacrificing accuracy or peace of mind. Computers are specifically built to handle more than one task at a time; you are not. While there are some low level tasks in which you can multi-task, such as eating and watching television, for professional editors doing client work, multi-tasking is an idea whose time should never have come.

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 multi-task at home or at the workplace you're likely to mess up something in your day or week. 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.

Multi-tasking is Costly

Research shows that multi-tasking seldom enables people to accomplish more, if you take the "long run" view. A study published by American Psychological Association's *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, conducted by researchers Joshua Rubinstein, Ph.D., David Meyer, Ph.D.; and Jeffrey Evans, Ph.D., found that the effects of multi-tasking can actually be counterproductive.

The primary cost of multi-tasking is, ironically, the very thing that workers are often desperate to save — time. "People in a work setting, who are banging away on word processors at the same time they have to answer phones and talk to their co-workers or bosses — they're doing switches all the time," says Meyer. This inability to concentrate for even ten or twenty minutes at a time may be costing a company as much as 20 to 40 percent of its income. The researchers refer to this as "time cost."

Work Smarter

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 only possible to move through it one customer at a time.

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 productivity and your peace of mind will improve.

Ironically, attempting to multi-task may offer some temporary psychological benefits. In the short run, it can help reduce anxiety as the practitioner erroneously believes he is saving time. In the long run, it contributes to greater anxiety: one comes to believe that there are no options for making it through the day without "doubling up" on activities. If you notice yourself falling into behavior patterns that resemble computerized multi-tasking, try these solutions:

- When you are writing or reading, do not stay near the internet, Instant Messenger, or any other computerized distractions.
- Take a 15-minute break once during the morning and once in the afternoon.
- Don't eat at your desk. Get away so you can recharge your battery.
- Wisely invest in equipment or technology that provides a significant return. Seriously consider any item that saves at least two hours a week of your time.

Whenever possible focus on the big picture of what you're trying to accomplish. This will allow activities that "seem" urgent to be viewed from a broader perspective. More importantly a big picture focus paves the way for new solutions to emerge.

Jeff Davidson is a popular speaker on the topic of Managing Information and Communication Overload, and the award-winning author of 36 books, including Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-up Society. For a complete resource list including books, A/V, and Jeff's keynote and breakout presentations visit BSI's web site www.BreathingSpace.com or call Jeff directly at 919-932-1996.