

Break away from multi-tasking

By Jeff Davidson

Chatham residents unite: it is time to forsake multi-tasking! When you attempt to do two or more things at one time, you're multi-tasking, and it doesn't matter if you're serving a client or working alone. When you continually multi-task, you're more likely to do an unsatisfactory job.

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, if it include 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.

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.

Consider some of the greatest people in history: Ghandi or Martin Luther King, for instance. 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



Our society is geared toward doing many things at once, but to do your best, focus on one task at a time.

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. 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. 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.

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. Multiply what happens in each minute 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.

For today, give yourself the benefit of working on one thing at a time. You may have to switch gears when the someone makes a request, when that important phone call comes through, or if you receive a message 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 happiest.

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.

- 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 surroundings with plants, pictures, art, or decorations that inspire creativity.

Jeff Davidson helps organizations and individuals overcome the relentless burden of information and communication overload. Visit www.BreathingSpace.com or call 800-735-1994.