

Associations Now
 Journal of Association Leadership
 Knowledge Center
 Store
 Research Initiatives
 Acronym blog
 Associapedia wiki
 Video Library



publications & resources

[home](#) > publications & resources

Features

Human Potential: Pardon the Interruption EXECUTIVE UPDATE, March 2004

Nearly every message in society equates peak productivity with your ability to double or triple the number of activities you perform at once. Want to know the real and decidedly unglamorous secret to getting things done? Focus.

By: *Jeff Davidson*

You have one thing you must get done today, and what happens? E-mail, phone call, your boss drops by, your staff needs help... it's no wonder concentration is the biggest casualty of business today.

A study by Pitney Bowes reveals that 40 percent of workers are interrupted six or more times an hour by various messages, while another 37 percent are interrupted three to five times an hour. For people trying to get things done in their personal lives, that percentage might be even higher. No wonder no one seems to have any down time, despite myriad "time-saving" technological devices. Indeed, the key to accomplishment seems decidedly not high-tech and may be something you heard repeatedly from your high school teacher: concentrate.

It sounds simple enough, but, without serious effort, it is hard to accomplish. One nonprofit finance administrator was fighting off unrelenting phone calls during the period he wanted to concentrate on family each evening. He finally signed up for a service offered by his phone company that feeds calls directly into an answering machine without even ringing the phone. The service now kicks in between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. each night, and his friends and colleagues know that either they must reach him at another time or that he will get back to them after he checks the machine at 9 p.m.

Another association executive draws on his organizing skills to stay focused at work. "When I need to find something, I can usually do so in minutes or even seconds, because I keep my files organized," he explains. "I don't leave at the end of the day before arranging the next day's work in terms of priority status. That way, the next morning I give immediate attention to those tasks or projects that are most important. It may sound trite or mundane, but this approach really works well for me."

He's found that being a good time manager also helps his concentration: "It's too distracting to handle phone calls all day long. I only return phone calls at a certain time of the day, which frees up other time so I can give my full attention to the task at hand."

Lou Palermo, director of education at the Club Managers Association of America, says that he can indeed take phone calls and handle interruptions without letting them throw him off course. He just turns right back to what he was doing when the phone call or interruption is finished. "I guess it was part of my training when I worked for the U.S. Secret Service," he notes. "If you didn't concentrate on what you were supposed to be doing, you could get hurt."

Palermo also works out seven days a week, taking a 50- or 60-minute jog each morning. "The run keeps me mellow," he says, "and working out, in general, facilitates a higher level of concentration at work."

"Focus beats brilliance every time," agrees a wise friend. And he's right. You will find no greater efficiency than giving the task at hand your full concentration. But you're the type of person who can do three things at once, right? You eat lunch while checking e-mail and talking on the phone. You make your to-do list and quietly outline a report for Tuesday while "listening" to a PowerPoint presentation at a meeting on Monday. How else can you get everything done? And it's the same during your personal time. Have you ever done something like paid bills while waiting in the grocery store line and smiling at your chattering daughter once in a while so she thinks you're paying attention?

It's too easy to fall into a familiar trap: "So much is expected of me — I have to double and triple my activities." The false economy of attempting to do two things at once is ingrained in a culture that rewards the workaholic, the 16-hour-a-day entrepreneur, the super mom, and the hyperenergetic student. But whether at work or home, attempting to multitask ensures that you'll miss your day, your week, and ultimately your life.

m member benefits

[Shape Your Future](#)
[Network and Discover](#)
[Invest in You](#)
[More](#)

JOIN NOW!

Thanks to Our Featured
 Strategic Partner



Unmasking Multitasking

Does multitasking truly enable people to accomplish more at work, home, or in between? Not necessarily, according to recent research. A study published by the *American Psychological Association's Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* found that the effects of multitasking can actually be counterproductive.

"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 coworkers or bosses — they're doing switches all the time," says study coauthor David Meyer, Ph.D. Not being able to concentrate for, say, ten minutes at a time may cost an organization as much as 20 to 40 percent of its income, says Meyers. Researchers even have a name for this expense: "time cost."

"In effect," Meyer explains, "you've got writer's block briefly as you go from one task to another. You've got to make a decision to switch tasks, actually make the switch, and then get warmed back up on what you were doing."

This see-sawing attention can even prove dangerous. Talking on a cell phone while driving, for instance, may seem safe enough, but you may not realize how much attention it requires. According to Meyer, "A lot of folks think, 'Well, cell phoning while driving is really no big deal, and I can get away with it.' Even if you have a cell phone that's not held by hand and can be dialed by voice, you still have a really big conflict, because when you're driving, you need to be looking at various places. You need to be reading signs. You need to be talking to yourself about those in order to — through your mental speech — make decisions about where to go with your car. And there's no way to do that while on the cell phone, because you have to use your 'inner ears' and 'inner speech' and even your 'inner eyes' to imagine what the person on the phone is talking about."

The same study also shows that the risks of multitasking increase with more difficult tasks. "A very simple conversation on the phone while driving a car — maybe 'Honey, please pick up some bread on the way home' — might not draw too much concentration," Rubinstein says. "But if the conversation becomes difficult or emotionally charged or mentally taxing — 'Honey, the house is burning down; what should I do?' — it draws more attention and more mental resources away from your primary task, which is driving the car. You're more likely to have an accident." And haven't we all burned ourselves at least once while pulling something out of the oven, talking on the phone, and glancing sideways to check on the children?

Curbing the Urge

Aside from the possible physical dangers of multitasking, though, is the psychic toll. Workers on the job ingest an estimated aggregate of 15 tons of aspirin daily just in the United States. Research finds that at least one in four workers contends with anxiety-related illness, and job-related stress accounts for most of the absenteeism and illness that the typical professional today experiences. Could workplace multitasking be a contributing factor?

Possibly. Researchers at the Medical College of Wisconsin have discovered if you perform a task as simple as tapping your foot, you activate the primary motor in your cortex, a section of your brain. If your task is more involved, if it includes planning to tap your foot to a sequence (such as onetwo, onetwothree, onetwo, onetwothree), then two secondary motor areas in the front of the cortex are engaged. You are drawing on more of your brain's functioning capacity. Don't worry, though; your brain can handle it most of the time.

The point is that when you engage in multitasking, your brain function changes to incorporate the extra activities, so if you want to do the best at whatever you're doing, allow your brain to concentrate on one activity at a time. If it's a complex task, consider whether you're working on several parts of the same task or two different tasks.

When speaking at conventions and executive retreats, I sometimes conduct a brief exercise with my audiences by asking them to take out their watches and do nothing but stare at them for a solid minute. Few can do it. In this society, you are fed a message that emphasizes the importance of motion and activity. Merely reading, thinking, or reflecting doesn't look busy or productive enough.

But you should memorize the words of Alexander Hamilton:

"Men give me some credit for genius. All the genius I have lies in this: When I have a subject at hand, I study it profoundly. Day and night it is before me. I explore it in all its bearings. My mind becomes pervaded with it. Then the effort which I have made is what people are pleased to call the fruit of genius. It is instead the fruit of labor and thought."

You and a friend can easily test whether Hamilton's example of focused living could boost your own productivity. Decide on any three minor tasks in which the two of you can engage simultaneously. One task could be stacking pennies; another could be drawing 15 stars on a blank sheet of paper; a third could be linking paper clips. You each have the same number of items.

You and your friend start these tasks at the same time. You stack a few pennies at a time, make a few stars on a blank piece of paper, and link some paper clips, indiscriminately alternating the three tasks. Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, your friend stacks an equal number of pennies to completion. He then turns to making 15 stars on a page and, when done, finally links all of the paper clips.

Who do you think will finish faster, with greater ease, and in better shape mentally and emotionally? I'll bet on your friend who focused on the task at hand, took it to completion, and then turned to the next one while you were bouncing back and forth between activities. You may have been more prone to errors, such as knocking over your penny stack. Even if you were quite an adept task juggler, you probably couldn't keep pace, or your work quality was not as good. Perhaps your paper clips became tangled, or your 15 stars lacked artistic merit. Multiply the effect of this test by how often you flip flop between activities in a day or year, and it's easy to understand why you're losing productivity.

Dismissing Distractions

In 1990, author Alvin Toffler told me that the workplace is a terrible place to get things done these days. With the distractions in your office, it's often better to work at the library, in the conference room, or on a park bench.

I was once consulting for a supervisor in Minnesota with six employees. He wanted to use his time more efficiently and focus better. He said his employees came to him with questions every couple of hours. That seemed harmless enough, but look at how it built up: If an employee asked a question every two hours, the supervisor got four from that person each day. With six employees, that meant 24 questions a day or 120 interruptions a week, resulting in disruptions of the manager's work three times each hour in a 40-hour week! I devised a system to help him cope with the interruptions and regain control of his time; I called it the "J4 System," with "J" standing for his name, Jeff.

I asked the supervisor to put the questions into four categories of manageability. The first category question, J1, was already answered in print and did not need a personal reply; it was in the company policy manual. The supervisor told his employees, "Please don't bother me with J1 distractions."

The second category question, J2, was one that a peer or bookkeeper could answer; the supervisor did not need to be bothered with this type of question either. J3s needed only a short yes-or-no answer. Such questions required interaction with the supervisor but not much. The final category, J4 distractions, required the supervisor's response.

How many questions were at the J4 level of importance? Even assuming each person asked two J4 questions per day, 60 interruptions each week, the number of interruptions to Jeff's workday decreased by half. Almost immediately, the supervisor was able to better use his time, increase his concentration, and reduce his stress.

If you've been multitasking for a long time and suddenly attempt to switch to working on one thing at a time, guess what happens? You may feel a sudden increase in anxiety. It's like trying to kick an addiction to a chemical stimulant. The natural inclination is to get back into the addiction. So it is with multitasking.

To become a master of doing one thing at a time, pick an activity you enjoy, where there's a high probability that you can engage in it without doing anything else. It might be driving your car with the radio off, reading in your favorite armchair without snacking, or listening to music instead of banishing it to the background.

Start with small segments. If you're reading in your favorite armchair, promise yourself you'll go 10 minutes without any munchies the first night. The second night, go 15. You may soon be able to read for an hour without having to resort to snacks.

If you're involved in conceptual thinking or creative problem solving ("How can we adjust our budget to save for a trip to Europe?"), find as quiet and comfortable a place as possible. Hang a "Please Do Not Disturb" sign nearby and consider listing a time when you will be available to converse.

If you are confronted by many tasks competing for your attention, identify the one that is most important 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 immediately.

People are likely to face more distractions in the future, not fewer. For today, give yourself the benefit of working on one thing at a time. You may have to switch gears when your child returns from school or the doctor calls back — but when you switch gears, switch them entirely. Give your complete attention to the pressing issue at hand. You likely will find that this is a more effective way to actually check off your to-do list or complete that tax return in an afternoon.

Author Link: Jeff Davidson, based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and on the Web at www.breathingspace.com, is a conference speaker and an author of more than two dozen books, including *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Your Time* (Alpha, 2001). He can be reached at 919-932-1996 and jeff@breathingspace.com.