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Multitask No More

By Jeff Davidson

While it may seem like a method to get a lot done, multi-tasking can actually result in stress and a feeling of time racing by.

Why One Thing?

All things considered, you work best when you focus on one task at a time, such as securing that one new listing. On many levels you probably already know this, but when is the last time you practiced it? It's too easy to fall into the trap claiming, "So much is expected of me, I have to double and triple my activities."

Every message in society says that it's okay to double and even triple the number of activities you perform at one time.

Many sales pros as well as executives suffer from a misdirected sense of urgency stemming from too many tasks and responsibilities. Bob W., age 41, works for a large brokerage firm in the International Square building in Washington. He is friendly, successful, and always in a rush. He talks fast, moves fast, eats fast, and he never lets up. Bob is hooked on multi-tasking. Certainly, it is appropriate to work more quickly than normal at certain times. It is a problem, however, when it becomes a standard operating procedure.

At the workplace and at home, attempting multi-tasking ensures that you will miss your day, week, and ultimately your life. I know people who are 40 years old who can't remember where their thirties went, and people who are 50 who can't remember where their forties went.

The Decade Of The Brain

The House Committee on Appropriations asked the Department of Health and Human Services, the National Advisory of Neurological Disorders and Stroke Council, and the National Advisory of Mental Health Council to prepare a report for Congress on how scientists working through the federal government could have a unique opportunity to advance and apply scientific knowledge about the brain and the nervous system.

The report cited that researchers have learned more about the brain and nervous system during the last ten years than throughout all of history, and progress during the next decade promises to be spectacular.

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“The human brain is the most complex organ system in nature,” the report states. “What is so remarkable is that the brain both coordinates major bodily functions and provides the capacity for self-awareness, for learning, and for adapting to an ever-changing environment. The development of this marvelous machine is dependant upon processes that are set into motion at conception and result in a structure consisting of billions of cells.”

Too Much Brain Power?

As a species, superior intelligence has enabled human beings to dominate the planet while simultaneously holding the potential for human extinction. In *The Run Away Brain: The Evolution of Human Uniqueness*, author Christopher Wills observes that human brain power has enabled the species to multiply in unreasonable numbers, putting such stress on the planet that ecological and nuclear catastrophes have become a real possibility.

Wills argues that “surely we are now too smart to go on breeding ourselves to extinction, destroying most of the rest of the species on the planet in the process. Surely we are too smart to blow ourselves up with nuclear weapons invented by our runaway brains.”

On an individual level, it’s likely that your ability to do two things at once is symptomatic of the human species’s ability to do two things at once. 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 supermom, and the hyper-energetic high school student.

Anytime you undertake original or creative thinking — working with numbers, charts, or graphs; writing, copying, editing, or proofreading — diverting your attention is bound to result in far less than your best effort and often leads to costly errors. What’s more, the mental and psychic toll you place on yourself in attempting multi-tasking or in doing one stressful job for too long, can be harmful. Your brain can become overtaxed!

Consider the case of air traffic controllers who have been on duty too long, have had too many planes come in at a given time, and have the responsibility of keeping hundreds of lives safe by making the right decisions in split-second timing. It’s no wonder that this is a high-stress, high burnout position, and one that professionals usually abandon at a young age.