

Multitask Less and Focus More

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Today's question comes from the owner of an established company, with employees both in the field and in the office. This company is good at what it does, but sometimes struggles with overload. Here's today's question: Everyone in my company has a core job assignment. On top of that we all have responsibilities for providing back up to team members and other departments. That seems pretty normal, based on conversations I have with other business owners in my industry. What concerns me is this: I think we're losing a lot of productivity, sometimes, when we do too many things at once. What do you think, and do you have any suggestions for what to do about it?

This owner is talking about multi-tasking, which is something everyone in business today deals with, all day long. It seems that we are encouraged to, and rewarded for, having a lot of things to do in our day. Being busy, however, is different from being productive. Research done in the 1990's points out that sometimes being busy, and trying to do several things at once, actually costs time and results in lower overall productivity.

Today we'll look at what the research shows about multi-tasking. What are some of the traps we can fall into? What can we do personally to better manage the flurry of activities that

make up a typical work day? How can we help our employees to increase productivity?

The one study that came up repeatedly in our research was done in the early 1990's, by Rubinstein, Myer and Evans, and was published under the title: Human Perception and Performance. The authors reported lost productivity, attributed to switching from one activity to another, as the subjects set aside one task and ramped up on another.

The authors of the study found subjects lost less time switching between tasks they were most familiar with. Subjects lost the most time switching between complex tasks, and tasks they didn't understand well, or with which they were less familiar.

What are the traps we fall into, related to multi-tasking. If you think about your day, you'll probably find lots of examples. You're working at your desk, the phone rings, you pick it up, and start responding to the caller. Phone call is over, and you have to take a minute to figure out what it was you were doing before. You take another minute, to get your head back into that former activity.

You're holding a meeting, and someone pops their head in to ask a quick question. The entire room stops for the interruption.

Momentum is lost, and has to be regained.

You think of something important you want to share with an employee. You get up from your desk, go to that employee, and wait a minute for them to stop what they're doing and pay attention to you. You have your discussion and return to your desk, to pick up another task. The employee processes what you had to say, and has to return to whatever they were doing previously. Additionally the employee may keep interrupting what they are working on, to go over what you said, reanalyzing and figuring out what to do with the new information.

You have different three things you have to get done by 10 am. You start one, get as far as you can, then set it aside, start task #2, then put task #3 in motion. If you're lucky, you'll get them all done by 10. Or, you get them part way finished, and realize 10 am is unrealistic. You stop what you're doing to make some calls to get extra time, then go back to trying to finish all 3 tasks with the new deadlines in mind.

You're going through your email, with the goal of cleaning out your inbox and insuring everyone who needs to gets an appropriate response. You come across an inquiry that needs immediate attention. You focus there, and an hour goes by, as you gather

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information, figure out the best way to respond, and craft your message back. Then it's time for your next meeting. You toss things at your employees, asking them to pick up the slack as you race out the door, worried you'll be late for your next appointment.

Sound familiar? We do it all day long. It's called multi-tasking. As owners, we are constantly juggling tasks and demands. We drop one thing, to handle a higher priority item. And we often end up working longer hours, and getting less done, as a result. Learning how to multi-task less, and focus more, may help us get more done in the long run.

There was one very interesting note in my research for this article. According to Sanjay Gupta, CNN medical correspondent, experts report that women appear to be better at multi-tasking than their male counterparts. It is believed that this may be evolutionary. According to Sally Helgesen in *The Female Advantage*, men's and women's brains are wired differently. Men's brains tend to function in a more linear fashion, while women's brain functioning has been described as resembling a spiderweb, where thoughts can travel outward and across, in a less directive fashion. If this is true, it may also mean that while women may be better suited to multi-tasking, they still have to learn to manage to completion; while men may think

in more linear way, they still have to handle and sort through interruptions and changing priorities.

The human brain is a wonderful tool. It functions much like the random access memory in a computer. It can put information into background, and process it, while focused on other primary tasks. Our brains are great at rapidly switching from one thought to the next. That is the good news, and potentially the bad news, all in one.

The brain needs a strong control function, to tell it what to work on, in which order. Information running in background is regularly pushed forward for consideration – and interruption of other primary tasks. We can all benefit from practice at keeping our brain processing running smoothly in the background, while we limit popups that in turn interrupt what we are currently working on. We need to learn to maintain focus on primary tasks, and discipline as to how and when we draw information forward, from random access, for consideration at the appropriate time.

Here are several things you can do, to increase your productivity, and keep control over multi-tasking. Keep lists. Learn to say no. Learn to do a better job of budgeting your time. Learn to complete one task before moving on to the next. Learn to delegate.

Keep lists on paper; get a notebook to write out your lists. Have a list of tasks you want to complete. Have a list for things you want to discuss with employees – some employees you interact with frequently might have their own specific list. Learn to set aside thoughts, by writing them down on paper, and returning to them at a later time. Use your calendar to schedule activities, so you know you won't forget to do something later.

Learning how to say no, delegate, and budget your time, as you pick your top priorities, is crucial for a good manager. It is tempting to stop what you're doing and respond every time someone asks you a question – but it's not always the most effective action to take. Before you start a task, figure out how much time it is realistically going to take, and then plan it out on your calendar.

One great tool for helping with focus is meditation. If you haven't tried it, think about it. Meditation can help to quiet the noise from all of those activities cycling around in the back of your random access memory. It can help you to build the mental discipline to focus on one thing, and bring it to closure.

Another great tool is vacations and time away from the business. Learn to turn it off, and leave it behind. This gives you time to reassess priorities. It also creates the space where you let



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employees take over for you. And, it gives your brain and body time to rest and recharge, so they can function more efficiently when you return.

You can also do a lot to help your employees with multi-tasking. Lay out a clear set of guiding principles, which help employees better prioritize. Train people to respect each other's priorities, by first asking, may I interrupt you. Train people to schedule meetings, to send emails, and to plan activities, rather than running around interrupting each other.

Look at workflow in the office. Are the accounting people picking up telephones? Is the receptionist running errands? Are there times of the day or week when the phones ring off the hook, and other times when it's dead quite? Does your production manager do a good enough job scheduling the day's, week's and month's production? Are your sales people following through on prospects, closings, and implementations? Are there people who, several times daily, have to walk a mile or go up and down 2 flights of stairs, to communicate with others in the company?

Looking for a good book? Try Brian Tracy, Focal Point: A Proven System to Simplify Your Life, Double Your Productivity, and Achieve All Your Goals; AMACOM; New York; 2002.

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