

The myth of multi-tasking unravelled

Contrary to popular belief, multi-tasking is in fact counterproductive. Until now, multi-tasking has been viewed as a valuable business skill and has frequently been a requirement in job advertisements. However, according to contemporary research conducted by Rubenstein and Meyer (2001) the time cost of switching from task to task reduces productivity, particularly when it comes to a complex undertaking. Rather, tasks are more successfully and efficiently accomplished if they are completed one at a time. This new wave of concern over the repercussions of juggling tasks simultaneously is reflected in the new ban on using handheld mobile phones while driving.

Unfortunately our technology saturated lifestyles are a breeding ground for distractions and have led to an emerging generation of multi-taskers. According to professors at Stanford University the bombardment of mobile phones, computers and televisions all vying for our attention triggers a natural human reaction to multi-task. Even the technology itself is becoming increasingly proficient at multi-tasking. No longer is phone just a phone; it allows you to take photos, send emails and listen to music all from one device. In light of the increasing mobility and variety of technology multi-tasking is a highly tempting habit. However, subsequent tests prove low multi-taskers are more productive and efficient at navigating through the 'media maze' than high multi-taskers, who are easily distracted. This prompts calls for more simplification rather than sophistication of working practices in order to improve workplace productivity and safety.

To break the habit, start by eliminating as many distractions as possible and check your priorities constantly. With 2009 winding down, it's a great time of the year to reshuffle priorities, set fresh goals and change direction if necessary in order to be profitable and productive for the coming year.

The following are some tips to help you streamline your schedule and avoid the hidden costs of juggling multiple tasks.

List your tasks for the day and:

- Categorise your tasks under the headings 'want' and 'need' to accomplish
- Rank tasks in order of importance using the ABCD method
- Match your priorities with those of your organisation
- Schedule top ranked priorities during productivity cycles

Scheduling is an effective way of ensuring you minimise multi-tasking by allocating enough time for each task. Here are some must dos you should abide by when constructing your schedule:

1. Begin by breaking up larger weekly tasks into smaller Monday-Friday increments
2. Avoid over scheduling and allow enough time for the tasks you need to do
3. Review your schedule throughout the day
4. Check off the tasks as you complete them as this will motivate you to keep on track
5. Check the following day's schedule before leaving work and rearrange tasks if necessary
6. Accept the reality that you won't always be able to cross off all the tasks at the end of the week

While multitasking is a tempting means to deal with our fast paced lifestyles, it is wasteful and an inefficient use of our valuable time. Bottom line: "To do two things at once is to do neither." - Publilius Syrus, Roman slave, first century BC