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MULTI-TASKING MYTHS

By Pam Baumeister

Think Doing More Than One Thing at a Time Makes You Super Efficient? Experts Are Starting to Say No

Recently, I arranged a meeting with a business acquaintance who I was interested in getting to know better. I was looking forward to digging into her experience and insight and gleaming what she had learned in her business, perhaps to then apply this new knowledge to my own business efforts. Our meeting didn't go as well as I had hoped.

She greeted me cordially as we sat down in her office across from each other at her L-shaped desk. From there, it all went downhill. She immediately turned to her computer screen and began what appeared to be frequent checking of e-mail, searching the Internet, and frenetic typing — all while conducting our meeting.

I left her office wondering why I was even there, what we talked about, and how she can carry on conversations of any significance while trying to juggle all those things at once.

This woman's rude behavior to me is an extreme example of a fallacy that has grown worse and worse in America and other countries, the one that says multitasking is good!

What's sad about this whole phenomenon is this businesswoman probably thinks her multitasking is good and efficient for her and for her business. After all, we're bombarded daily with lauds of multi tasking. Resumes routinely state that a person is a good multitasker. Job descriptions often require "good multitaskers." Advertising for Sprint applauds the people who use their products because such products allow them to multitask, therefore making them better people, the real achievers in society.

In actual fact, this behavior is often counter productive, and is causing stress to those who fall prey to its lure. Further, many multitaskers produce inferior work and results.

Don't Talk on the Phone and Read This at the Same Time

While attempting to manage several tasks at once may be widely accepted in society, it doesn't mean you'll get more done. You've no doubt heard someone brag about her or his multitasking skills. Next time you have lunch out, take a look around and see how many diners are yapping on their cell phones, or are busy typing something into those phones, all the while trying to stuff an egg roll into their mouths. You sometimes wonder why they don't go all the way and whistle "The Stars and Stripes" while they're at it. Whatever happened to just plain enjoying lunch and your company?

A growing number of experts in the fields of time management and achievement are concluding that the more people try to multitask the less they get done.

How to Break the Multitasking Habit

There are steps you can take to regain your life. Set down your phone, turn off your computer and read this:

- >> Get rid of some of your tasks. Are you overloading yourself with more tasks than you can possibly handle? Take a look at what is most important and get rid of the rest. This may mean you have to say the dreaded word, “no,” to requests of your time, but in the long run you’ll be glad you did.
- >> “Take control over technology,” says Dave Crenshaw, author of the forthcoming “The Myth of Multitasking: How ‘Doing It All’ Gets Nothing Done,” a Jossey-Bass publication due out in August 2008. Become master over the nagging beeps and buzzes by creating some silence. Turn off audible reminders on your e-mail and electronic devices.
- >> Focus on one thing at a time. You may be resistant at first, but you’ll notice after time you are better able to connect with the people, tasks and values that mean more to you. “Focus on the person,” says Crenshaw. He advises that “when you have the choice between technology and a person you value, always choose the person.”
- >> Follow Clint Eastwood’s words of advice from “Dirty Harry,” “A man’s gotta know his limitations.” Dr. David E. Meyer, Ph.D, professor from the Cognition and Perception Program at the University of Michigan’s Psychology Department quotes that line frequently to himself and adds, “if you don’t, it will be worse than shooting yourself in the foot.”
- >> Set aside time to do what is most important. “Schedule what you can schedule,” says Crenshaw. This means only check and return e-mail and voice mail at specific times during the day.

“People condition themselves to jump from one thing to the next — this is a direct result of thinking multitasking is a good thing,” says Dave Crenshaw, author of the forthcoming book, “The Myth of Multitasking: How ‘Doing It All’ Gets Nothing Done.” According to Crenshaw, one of Utah’s foremost time management and efficiency experts who has worked with prominent companies and executives all over the country, “this soon develops into a pattern of behavior, which then turns into a habit.”

David E. Meyer Ph.D, a professor from the Cognition and Perception Program at the University of Michigan’s Psychology Department says, “Because you can’t really do all things at the same time, you have to flip back and forth between tasks. You have different channels for processing in your brain. If you are doing two tasks that use the same channel, like the language channel for example, you’ll have to shut one task off while you pay attention to the other.”

You may have experienced this when you have a phone conversation with someone while you are sitting in front of your computer. As you sit there, you may see several e-mails come in. Some of them are more interesting than others. The moment you decide to read one is the moment you initiate “shutting out” the person on the phone. “Maybe you shut them out for a few seconds or more while you read the e-mail message and at some point you’ll come back and check in with the person on the other line. You simply can’t listen or read more than one stream of language at the same time because of how the brain is wired up,” says Meyer.

You May Have One or More of the Following Side Affects

Switching or flipping in between two or more tasks will eventually, if not immediately, have negative side affects. Any switching back and forth between tasks can waste time, erode relationships, decrease accuracy in the task at hand, and escalate your stress levels.

“The stress you feel from multitasking depends largely upon how much you care about how well you’re doing,” says Meyer. “An air traffic controller, for example, has a job in which many lives are at stake. If he messes up, many people can die.” This stress level from having to multitask relates to a high burnout rate, according to Meyer. At the other extreme, teenagers multitask, he says as a lark. “They may not care how each of their tasks are getting done.”

If you care at all about the quality of your work, you need to steer clear of multitasking. Meyer notes, “If you measure the quality of performance of multitaskers, they aren’t better than those who don’t multitask. In many cases they are worse.”

People think they need to multitask because of the nature of their lives. They accept responsibility for more tasks than is physically or mentally possible. Meyer equates this with having an “excessively large appetite.” When you take on more tasks than you can possibly do, you are not only setting yourself up for failure, but you are also adding more stress than you can handle. “That’s a faulty economy,” he adds, “and people need to shed some of their tasks at that point.”

Breaking the Cycle

The human brain isn’t capable of focusing on two or more things at the same time. We now have cell phones that beep and buzz, computers that ding at us when we have new e-mail, and PDAs that alert us to our next appointment. We are overloaded from all sides with things that need our attention, not to mention the other humans that need our attention. Often, it is difficult to manage and figure out which to tackle first. If we attempt to do more than one thing at a time, we give less of ourselves.

If you now think you might suffer from the multitasking trap, you may have experienced one or more of the aforementioned side affects. There are ways to break the cycle of multitasking and all the havoc it can wreak in your life.

By practicing a little self-discipline, you’ll be able to avoid the multitasking trap and regain peace, silence, efficiency and accuracy in your work and personal life. Crenshaw uses an economic term to describe the loss from multitasking as “switching cost.” Eliminate that “switching cost” by facing the person you’re speaking to, by looking him in the eye and by actually paying attention to what he is saying. At that point, you’ll not only endear him to you, but you’ll build a relationship that will last even when e-mail is a thing of the past.●

Pam Baumeister knows multitasking first hand. She grew up as one of nine siblings and is now the mother of three girls. She runs an Advertising/PR agency called Fruition Consultants (fruitionconsultants.com) with her husband, Carl. She also enjoys yoga, hiking and laughing.

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