



BLOGGING INNOVATION

The Myth of Multitasking

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Have you ever watched someone attempting to do several things at once in the workplace?

Their energy level is high, they're constantly in motion, and they look like the kind of worker every organization wants to have. But if you look closer you can see they're not accomplishing much. Or else they're getting it done slower and with more mistakes than people who focus on one activity at a time.

We have a word for this behavior. It's called multitasking. More than just a popular buzzword, multitasking has become a workplace badge of honor that many proudly wear. But current research shows that multitasking does not serve us well, and that we engage in the behavior at our own peril.

In a recent study, researchers at Vanderbilt University used MRI imaging to monitor brain functioning in people engaged in more than one activity at a time. They summarized their findings as follows:

“When humans attempt to perform two tasks at once, execution of the first task usually leads to postponement of the second one. This task delay is thought to result from a bottleneck occurring at a central, amodal stage of information processing that precludes two response selection or decision-making operations from being concurrently executed.... Our results suggest that a neural network of frontal lobe areas acts as a central bottleneck of information processing that severely limits our ability to multitask.”

Or in plain English, humans suck at multitasking.

The problem isn't so much that we don't do well at multitasking. It's that we think we do. In today's time-deprived, more-on-our-plates-than-we-can-handle-at-one-time workplace, multitasking seems like a sensible approach to the incessant demands on our time and attention. So we continue to engage in the behavior, even in the face of increasing evidence that suggests we do so to our own detriment.

How does multitasking keep us from performing at our best?

1. It makes us less efficient. A million years of evolution has designed the human brain to focus on one task at a time. When chasing prey or fleeing a predator, suddenly shifting our attention to some other activity did not enhance the odds that we would live to chase or flee another day. The same holds true in today's office environment. In one study, participants who engaged in several tasks at once took nearly 1/3 longer to complete those tasks. They also made twice as many errors as those who did the same tasks one at a time.

Our brains aren't hardwired to perform two actions concurrently. When we attempt to juggle multiple tasks, our brains have to turn off the cognitive rules for the old task and turn on a different set of rules for the new one. Sort of like early PCs, when we had to insert one disk to word process and then eject it and insert another disk in order to run a database program (not that I am old enough to remember such things first hand!). This cognitive switching takes time, which reduces productivity, especially among those who multitask on a frequent basis.

2. It inhibits creativity. One might assume that working on several different activities at once would get the brain synapses firing and the creative juices flowing. But research shows the opposite. A Harvard Business School study evaluated the daily work patterns of several thousand people working on projects that required creativity and innovation. They found that those who focused on one activity for long periods of time exhibited higher levels of creative thinking. Those who experienced highly fragmented days, with ongoing interruptions and constant interaction with others, showed significantly lower levels of creative thinking.

3. It causes stress. No big surprise here. Multiple studies have shown that multitaskers exhibit higher levels of stress hormones. In addition, surveys have found that a large majority of people believe that struggling to keep up with information overload has lowered job satisfaction and caused conflict in their personal relationships. Some even reported that it damaged their health.

4. It's addictive. Again, the research supports the anecdotal evidence. We all know at least one person who can't go five minutes without checking their cell phone for text or voice messages, no matter what else they're doing. So it's no surprise that another Harvard study found that multitaskers often report feeling the equivalent of a "dopamine squirt" (dopamine is one of the feel-good brain chemicals) when engaged in a multitasking episode.

Conclusion

Clearly, multitasking does not produce the results we hope for or intend. Instead, it actually works against the goals we're trying to achieve. Tune in to next week's blog for tips on how to break this inefficient and ineffective cycle.