

MULTI-TASKING

De-Bunking The Myth

All of us have tried to do two things at the same time. It could be driving a car and talking on a cell phone, engaging in a conversation while working on the computer, or reading and simultaneously listening to music. Some of us even pride ourselves on how refined our skills have become at what is generally referred to as “*multi-tasking*”.

The reality, however, is that *multi-tasking* is a myth that just doesn't work in the way that most people have been led to believe.

Imagine that you're working on a difficult calculus problem. (Aren't all calculus problems difficult?) In the same room, a television show that you really like is nearing a pivotal moment. Can you pay attention to the show AND continue with multiple, complex computations? It is quite unlikely that you will be able to conduct both activities to a high standard of performance. Something has to suffer.

Look at that car on the highway. Either it's going too slowly in the passing lane or its speed and steering are erratic. As you finally pass it, you glance over at the driver who is talking on a cell phone or, even worse, is e-mailing or text messaging. Is that going to work well?

Examining these types of situations will provide insight into how behaviour affects performance. Furthermore, the underlying assumptions and the decisions that are unconsciously being made can be understood in a fuller context.

You “*know*” when you're talking with someone who is driving. The conversation is punctuated with abrupt pauses and interjections, as the driver's *primary focus* shifts from talking back to driving. The *quality* of the telephone discussion becomes impaired, because the driver needs to spend a certain amount of concentration on driving. Conversely, the quality of the driving is diminished, as the *primary focus* vacillates between the separate and distinct activities of driving and talking.

It is accurate to assert that both activities are being conducted in a shared time-frame and, therefore, one could argue that this is an efficient use of time which is the underlying assumption guiding the decision to have a cell phone conversation while driving.

If efficiency is the sole criteria, then multi-tasking certainly is the prudent thing to do, because it clearly maximizes time utilization. In assessing performance, though, the *effectiveness*, *quality* and *integrity* of the action also have to be considered and this is where multi-tasking collapses.



We have become so practiced at driving a car, for example, that for most of us much of it is done on “*auto pilot*”. The full standard of performance for driving a car requires that one is singularly focused on the *task of driving*: adhering to the speed limit; maintaining the proper, safe distance from the vehicle in front; constantly surveying the traffic from all directions; checking blind spots; anticipating possible defensive actions; signalling intentions; yielding to others; being courteous; and, oh yes, driving with two hands on the steering wheel. In order to achieve and maintain such performance, all external distractions must be rigorously excluded from the task of driving. Honestly, is this how you drive at all times?

We tend to view the act of driving a car as a convenience, a necessity and a right. We often forget that it also is a dangerous procedure that hurls a bulk machine forward at potentially lethal speeds. Concurrently, communicating with someone, in this instance through a cell phone, is an important human interaction that warrants full attention. What, then, is the *acceptable* standard of performance for each of these activities?

Picture a manager working on a computer, when an employee enters the office and starts a conversation. The manager chooses to engage in the conversation, but also continues with the computer work. What are the outcomes?

Because part of the manager’s overall attention is diverted to the conversation, it is highly probable that the computer work will be less than optimal. It may have errors or be sub-standard, thereby, requiring subsequent re-work. Thus, this approach is both somewhat inefficient and somewhat ineffective.

It is the interpersonal communication between the two people, however, which suffers the greatest deficiency. Interpersonal communication is comprised of verbal and non-verbal components, with the non-verbal aspect being the most dominant. If one’s eyes are riveted on the computer screen, then all the non-verbal cues will be missed. The parties will have engaged in a fractured, incomplete communication experience and this often can lead to misunderstandings and frustration.

Even more importantly, every communication encounter is an opportunity to demonstrate **respect** for the other person. The more one demonstrates respect for another person, the richer the conversation will be. Enriched conversations hold a greater likelihood that the outcome will be translated into higher performance. By not fully engaging in the conversation, the manager has inadvertently signalled a lack of respect for the employee, unfortunately eroding their relationship. The **integrity** of the action is rendered inadequate. Once again, what is the *acceptable* standard of performance for each of these different activities?

Many of us read, while music plays in the background. This might work reasonably well in some circumstances. But Ralph Waldo Emerson, in reference to Thoreau’s Walden, once admonished that one should “*Read Deliberately*”. By this, he was accentuating his appreciation that Thoreau wrote with serious intent and great precision, and that, as a reader, one needs to dedicate the same degree of attention and respect to the task of reading. When reading something that is important, serious, weighty, or difficult, all distractions, including background music, need to be minimized, so that the mind does not wander.



Some may contend that mundane, repetitive tasks, requiring minimal concentration, are appropriate for multi-tasking. It is precisely in these types of situations that accidents happen. The truth is that attempting to multi-task different types of activities just doesn't work as well as one might like to believe. After all, you wouldn't consider doing a space walk to repair a component on the International Space Station and watch a video at the same time! Your concentration and focus would be absolute! All tasks need to be approached with the highest degree of dedication and performance. One must be *Zen-like* – totally immersed *in the moment*.

The practice of multi-tasking actually involves conducting activities, *concurrently* (driving a car **AND** talking on a cell phone, working on a computer **AND** engaging in a conversation, etc.). A modified approach, that produces better outcomes, is to perform tasks, *consecutively*. This involves shifting back and forth between tasks, thereby filling vacant time. Each change in activity, however, requires a certain amount of rev-up time, re-focusing, concentration, and energy. This may offset the apparent productivity gain of undertaking multiple tasks within a common time-frame.

Many will contend that the ideas presented here are inaccurate and that multi-tasking does work. The critical consideration revolves around the overall performance – the **effectiveness, quality and integrity** that will be achieved in the disparate activities that are being contemplated. It's not just how quickly one can cycle through a task that is the measure of success. How well that activity is being completed is the other essential element. This needs to become part of one's decision-making matrix.

It is significant to note that high performing executives never attempt to multi-task. Instead, they maintain an intense focus on one task or issue at a time. They are absolutely dedicated and disciplined in what they are doing and then they totally switch their focus to the next issue or task. This is a lesson worthy of learning and practising.

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