

Multi-tasking is for Jugglers, Not Employees

A random search of job blogs reveals a fact that is hardly surprising: employers want their employees to multi-task. In fact, multi-tasking is often a job requirement for just about every worker regardless of industry or position. Likewise, many job-seekers proudly display multi-tasking on their résumé, ironically, often next to perfectionism. The question is, are multi-taskers really more efficient?

If you've ever seen someone talking on their cell phone while driving, or doing anything other than focusing on the road, then you've seen visual proof of humanity's inability to do too many mentally-overloading tasks at once. So what makes us think that an employee should be able to juggle multiple tasks at the same time? While we may want to believe that we can juggle multiple priorities, projects, and deadlines, the problem is that multi-tasking is a lot more complex than we think.

Several studies, most notably those conducted by Rubinstein, Meyer, and Evans (2001) indicated that when people take on more than one task at a time, they tend to become less efficient, particularly when it involves difficult or unfamiliar tasks. For example, imagine being on a conference call, and suddenly receiving an important email from a client. Chances are that



you'll click on the email and start reading it. There's also a very good chance that in the process of reading it, you'll either miss something being said during the conference call, or totally forget what the email was about within minutes of reading it.

Unlike a computer, we can only perform one complex task at a time, regardless of how fast we think our brain works. Any other concurrent tasks we perform are based on automatic processes - actions that are not using conscious thought and thus do not involve our full attention. This is aside from the fact that when we quickly switch from one task to another, a little adjustment



period is required on a cognitive level...sort of like how our eyes need to adjust to the dark after shutting off a bright light.

In 1998, Linda Stone coined the term “Continuous Partial Attention” to describe a state where a person is focused on one task, but his or her attention is scattered. Case in point: imagine having ten windows open on your browser, each devoted to different projects. As you’re working on one project, you discover that you can’t move forward until a colleague finishes his part of a report, so you switch to another. As you’re doing so, you also fire off a message to said colleague on the status of his part. After switching to another pending project, an important potential client calls about a proposal you are very interested in suggesting to her. You now shift to the SPECS you prepared for this conversation, flipping through your multiple windows to find it. By the time you hang up the phone and have begun writing up a contract for your newly-acquired client, your colleague gets back to you on your original project and indicates that all systems are go. So you immediately shift gears, figuring you can easily finish the contract after, and return to completing this pending project.

This, in essence, is Continuous Partial Attention. If, at this point, your assumption is that some key piece of information and task will be forgotten or lost in the shuffle, there’s a very good chance you’re right. And you can assume that many of your employees will suffer from Continuous Partial Attention, along with most job

candidates you will encounter. If this is not enough to persuade you to reconsider the value of multi-tasking, think about this point: It takes about 10 minutes on average for a person to recover from task-switching (this is called a “refractory period”) and to be able to focus on a new task. That means 10 minutes wasted for each interruption – email, phone call, colleague stopping by, or employee popping in to ask a “quick” question. So how many times per day does it happen to you? If you are a typical employee, chances are that this amounts to roughly 2 hours per day wasted through multi-tasking, with the intention of making you more efficient.

So what’s the alternative? Employees in a busy organization obviously need to be able to work on many different projects. The answer is effective time management, prioritization, and organization. And this must be done in collaboration with management. Managers need to indicate which tasks and projects are high priorities. They need to ensure that, when a project has multiple parts with multiple people working on them, deadlines coincide in such a way that no one is left hanging until someone else’s part is finished. Progress meetings need to be conducted regularly so that everyone knows where everyone else stands, and adjustments can be made ahead of time if deadlines cannot be met. Employees and managers should divide their day into several parts and focus, uninterrupted, on one task or project at a time for at least a few hours. And while open-door



policy is great in many respects, everybody needs to understand that popping in for every little question is not the way to go; rather, schedule a brief meeting with the person once you have a few items on the list and get all of them resolved in one shot.

The onus doesn't rest solely on managers, however. Employees need to at least have knowledge of effective time management and organization strategies, and this is where PsychTests can help. Available in **ARCH Profile**, the **TIME (Time Management Evaluation)** and **ORSKIT (Organization Skills Test)** can offer insight into whether a person has the skills and traits needed to work conscientiously and efficiently, or whether some training or mentoring is required. Employees who are organized and can manage their time effectively are able to distribute their cognitive and physical energy in such a way that they aren't overwhelmed or losing track of everything on their plate.

Master jugglers are for circuses. Master organizers are for your company. 🌀

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