



The Myth of Multitasking

How "Doing It All" Gets Nothing Done

by Dave Crenshaw
Jossey-Bass © 2008
144 pages

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Take-Aways

- The notion of multitasking is a misleading canard.
- Humans cannot simultaneously perform two activities that require concentration.
- "Background tasking" is doing two or more tasks that don't take mental effort, such as washing the dishes while chatting on the phone.
- "Switchtasking" is going back and forth from one task to another, giving the appearance of multitasking.
- Switchtasking takes more time than background tasking, disrupts your focus and reduces your productivity.
- "Active switches" are self-inflicted interruptions of your attention span; "passive switches" are disturbances others initiate.
- Giving other people less than your full focus can damage your relationships.
- Reduce work interruptions by scheduling "recurring meetings" and letting people know when you will be available.
- Use a time log to clarify how you spend your time so you can budget it better.
- Corporate culture reflects the work habits of the people at the top, so set a good example.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

7

Applicability

8

Innovation

7

Style

6

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why the idea that multitasking works is misleading; 2) How to deal with constant, active or passive interruptions at work; and 3) How to use your time productively without “switchtasking.”

Recommendation

Dave Crenshaw has managed to stretch a clear, simple concept into an entire book, but it is a useful, helpful concept. Crenshaw debunks the myth that multitasking can be effective and advocates focusing on one task at a time instead. He teaches this lesson by telling the story of a gifted business coach, Phil, and his stressed-out client, Helen. He uses the format of a business novel to demonstrate that multitasking is not an efficient way to get things done. Every time a person changes from one task to another, which Crenshaw calls “switchtasking,” he or she loses time and focus. The remedy, the author explains, is to cut down on interruptions, manage how you allocate your time and concentrate on a single task at a time. This is not exactly a groundbreaking theory in time management, but it is certainly a helpful reminder. *getAbstract* suggests this book to managers who must help employees handle their time and to people who need guidance to quit multitasking so they can actually get things done.

Abstract

Why Multitasking Is a Myth

Phil, a business and time management coach, arrived punctually for his meeting with Helen, the owner of GreenGarb, a successful, environmentally friendly clothing chain. Helen had asked for Phil’s help because her job was devouring all of her time and energy, leaving her feeling stressed out and emotionally drained. Like many of the other business owners and executives who hired Phil, she wanted less pressure and more leisure.

As Phil followed the receptionist down the hall to Helen’s office, he noticed the busy, hectic atmosphere that dominated her workplace. Employees’ desks were overflowing with papers and reports, people were rushing about, phones were ringing unanswered and the employees all looked stressed. The ambience could best be described as “controlled chaos.” Phil’s years as a business coach had taught him that a “business truly is a reflection of its owner,” so he drew a few conclusions about Helen’s organizational style from this disorder.

When Phil entered Helen’s office, she waved him toward a seat. She was wrapping up a meeting with two other men, while her colleague Sally watched. It was clear that Sally was waiting to grab a quick moment of Helen’s time. As soon as Helen finished her meeting and the men left, Sally rushed up to Helen with several key questions about merchandise that was in production. In one case, Helen had already dealt with a supplier’s query, but had been too busy to tell Sally. In another, Sally had submitted new designs that Helen had not yet had a chance to consider. Helen answered Sally’s queries in a rush and turned to Phil in desperation when Sally departed.

She shook her head, “I just don’t have enough time to do everything I need to! Everyone is constantly demanding my attention. I’m behind on checking my e-mail. My voice mail

“There are lies, damned lies, and multitasking.”

“Multitasking quickly became as popular and accepted as the automobile and the hamburger.”

“Switchtasking is very costly. It is a less effective and less efficient way to get things done.”

“The more responsibility you have, the more hats your wear, the more likely you are to become inefficient. It’s a law of switchtasking.”

“Generally the more extensive a person’s job description, the more responsibility for management a person has, the more they are assaulted by passive interruptions.”

“If you and I don’t set up a schedule and protect our time, we allow ourselves to be run over by the traffic of information.”

is full. I’m constantly thinking about what I need to do...I guess that’s what you’re here for, isn’t it?”

The Multitasking Queen Faces a Coup

Phil listened sympathetically and then asked, “Tell me, Helen: When I say the word ‘multitasking,’ what comes to mind?”

Helen proudly answered that she saw herself as the “queen of multitasking,” and that the term should be her middle name, because she always did several things at once. She told Phil that she expected all of her employees to multitask. Then Phil burst her bubble: “Multitasking is a lie,” he said. “Because everybody in our fast-paced world has accepted it...we’ve all adopted it as a way of life...but the truth is that multitasking is neither a reality nor is it efficient.”

The word “multitasking” became popular with the advent of the computer. Originally a computing term, it referred to the machine’s ability to do two tasks at the same time. However, computers really can’t do two things simultaneously. They just switch back and forth between tasks so rapidly that they give the appearance of doing several things concurrently.

Like computers, human beings are not capable of doing two things at once when both require mental concentration. Instead, people tend to do “background tasks,” that is, handling one thing that doesn’t take mental effort, such as washing the dinner dishes, while also talking on the telephone or watching television.

In reality, multitasking is never an efficient way to accomplish assignments. Phil praised Helen for working hard, but he elicited her rueful acknowledgement that no matter how hard she was working, she just wasn’t achieving the results she hoped to attain. “Your lack of effectiveness has everything to do with your multitasking,” he explained.

Phil began to quiz Helen about how she would spend a typical workday. Helen explained that, on a normal day, she would get tens if not hundreds of e-mails, so she checked her in-box a couple of times each hour. She also admitted that employees popped into her office without notice at least two or three times every hour to ask questions or enlist her input. In addition, she received at least one phone call every hour.

Phil made up a chart showing Helen that, on average, every hour of her workday contained at least half a dozen interruptions. “But that’s why I multitask!” exclaimed Helen. She defended her workstyle by explaining that she had learned to handle several things at once. For instance, she said, if she was writing a report and someone dropped by her office with a question, she would stop writing, address the inquiry and then return to working on the report.

“So you really didn’t multitask, did you?” Phil asked. “You were switchtasking. You switched back and forth between two tasks. It happened so fast that you didn’t recognize it.”

The Hazards of Switchtasking

Every time an interruption occurs while you are working, you have to change your focus. That breaks your concentration. Each time you pick up a different task, it takes longer to regain control of your attention. The time lost with each interruption might be small,

“Once you see the truth about how you are using time, you’ll have more clarity about what you want to do instead.”

“Helping people understand the simple truth will help them change their behavior faster than simply trying to get them to change their behavior.”

“All you can do is find the best way to operate within the time you’ve been given.”

“Unless you’re trying to communicate with a teenager, instant messaging is usually an inefficient business tool.”

but it all adds up in the form of a price called the “microswitching cost.” If Helen really gets six interruptions every hour, her microswitching cost could be as high as 30 minutes per hour. Research shows that the average multitasker loses up to 28% of the workday to interruptions.

Switchtasking costs more than just time. It can threaten your business and your personal life. If you habitually give your colleagues, employees, suppliers, customers and family members less than your full focus, you can damage these important relationships. For instance, if you file papers or take calls while customers or suppliers are in your office, they will interpret those interruptions as a sign that they’re not important enough to receive your full attention. Your children will feel resentful if you answer business calls, send e-mails from your PDA or read reports while they’re trying to play with you or talk to you about events in their lives.

Switchtasking is not an effective way to work. Even if you think you are good at multitasking, trying to do two things simultaneously means that completing any given task will take you more time than it would take someone who focuses on one chore at a time. Try to avoid both “active switches,” changes in focus that you initiate, such as taking a break from writing a memo to make a phone call, and “passive switches,” those interruptions that other people initiate. Passive switches are the bane of the busy executive’s day.

Reducing Interruptions

Some of the most common interruptions happen when co-workers drop into your office, for work-related reasons or just to visit. The ding that signals a new e-mail and the insistent ring of the telephone announce other common interruptions. You can control some work delays by muting the sound on your computer, or getting up from your desk and walking a visitor to the door, but it is harder to control others, like when the boss asks you to step into the conference room.

Helen asked Phil how she could reduce the number of interruptions she faced everyday from employees who genuinely needed to ask her questions. The first method he suggested was to “set recurring meetings.” If you need to consult with a particular employee frequently, then schedule a daily meeting at an agreed time for a defined length. The more information the employee requires, the more often you should meet, but focus tightly on moving work along in your mutual processes. Recurring meetings may be necessary for those employees who are answerable to you or who constantly require your input.

The second method for reducing interruptions is to tell your associates clearly when they can reliably anticipate that you will be available. For instance, if clients understand that you always return phone calls between four and five in the afternoon, they will feel comfortable leaving messages. Similarly, you can post a sign on your door telling employees when you’ll have office hours available to answer their questions. To avoid having to switchtask throughout the day, announce in advance when you will be available.

Phil explained to Helen that she needed a clearer understanding of how she was spending her time. He set up a time log that anyone could use. To create something similar, in the first column, list your anticipated activities, such as “lost time,” sleep, work, leisure, family time, community service, exercise and friends. Lost time refers to the small increments of time you spend doing the things you barely pay attention to, such as

“When we act as if multitasking is a good thing, we seriously damage our relationships with others.”

“The people we live with and work with on a daily basis deserve our full attention.”

“Multitasking: A polite way of telling someone you haven’t heard a word they said.”
[– Urban Dictionary.com]

washing your hands, brushing your hair, getting a cup of coffee or putting on a coat. Lost time can eat up as much as an hour each day.

Label the second column “boundaries,” and use it to describe your activities. For example, a work-related boundary might include travel time to the office or to outside appointments. Do not let your categories overlap.

In the third column, estimate the time you will spend on each activity. Total the number of hours you estimated for each activity, keeping in mind that a week has only 168 hours. If you planned for more hours than that, you’ve overestimated how much time you can give some of your activities. Look at some of the larger categories, such as sleep and work, and revise your estimate.

Phil asked Helen to write a sentence at the top of her worksheet reading: “There is only one time line. There is only one you.” This helped drive home the idea that a day has only so many hours. You can’t fit 65 minutes worth of work into a 60-minute hour, just as you can’t pour two cups of coffee into a single mug. When you know how you spend your time, you can create a time budget for the future.

Changes in Time

How do you change your deeply ingrained habits? Phil told Helen to take these steps:

- Accept that multitasking is not an effective way to get things done.
- Gain a clear understanding of how you use your time every week.
- Use this understanding to construct a realistic weekly time budget.
- Build into your calendar recurring appointments with the people you need to interact with the most.
- Let people know when you will be available by phone and in person.
- Avoid making active switches and curtail the number of passive switches in your life.
- Focus on the people or task you are dealing with at the moment.
- Include lost hours and travel in your time budget.
- Turn off your computer’s e-mail alert signal and check e-mail only at set times.
- Avoid instant messaging and other such distractions.

Helen asked Phil how to wean her company from its addiction to switchtasking. He suggested first educating her employees about the inefficiency of multitasking and switchtasking. He said her second step should involve improving the company’s operations. However, before Helen could do that, she needed to understand how her “personal systems” affected her “business systems.” In other words, her corporate culture reflected her work habits. Taking concrete steps to change the way she operates would show her employees how to use their time more wisely, too.

Once her changes were in place, Phil worked with her firm’s managers, as a group and individually, to help them avoid switchtasking and gain focus – just like Helen.

About the Author

Dave Crenshaw has coached business executives for the past decade. A frequent keynote speaker, he founded the Fresh Juice Strategy program.