

# Managing

## Multitasking in an Information-Overloaded World

**MARCIA PENNINGTON SHANNON** | Picture this: A lawyer talks on the telephone with a client while simultaneously answering e-mail and editing a document. This guy can multitask with the best of them. But what is the reality underlying this picture of seeming productivity?

The reality is that this lawyer is missing important information because he is not listening carefully to the client on the phone. In answering his e-mail, he responds inaccurately because he is not focused. And he misses the fact that his client's name is misspelled in the document he's editing. Plus, he keeps losing papers as he shuffles through the gigantic stack of files on his desk, looking for background data for both his client and his on-screen document.

This lawyer is driven by a need to do more in less time under the ever-growing pressures of today's fast-paced workplace. Because there never seems to be time to plan ahead, everything is last minute, a crisis looking for a place to happen. Moreover, his sense of pending crisis is affecting those he supervises, who feel a sense of being overloaded, overwhelmed and just plain discouraged.



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Does any of this describe you or someone you know? If you answered no, congratulations! You are rare.

According to two recent studies, our multitasking, information-overloaded world is taking a toll on us personally and professionally—and it is having a major impact on the workplace.

### Six Things at the Same Time: It's Not as Efficient as You Think

If we could just learn to multitask, we could get more things done in less time. Right? Well, actually, no. In a 2003 study reported in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, David Meyer, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan, found that those who multitask are less efficient than those who focus on one task at a time. The study results indicate that individuals actually lose somewhere between 20 to 40 percent efficiency—or two to three hours per day—as a result of switching between tasks or trying to do more than one complex task simultaneously. The time it takes to get back up to speed when you switch from one task to another costs time. And the more complicated the tasks, the greater the time loss.

In addition, the more complex a task, the more mental energy that it will draw. If you are doing two or more complex tasks at once, you cannot fully concentrate on any of them. The long-term results of multitasking include:

- Short-term memory loss
- Inability to comprehend things quickly
- Inability to concentrate
- Significant loss of efficiency
- High stress levels that can, in turn, cause physiological problems

These are significant issues, especially, according to Meyer, when the work “demands creativity, integration of thoughts and generation of new ideas”—in other words, what lawyers do. Multitasking can also lead to chronic overload, the subject of another important study.

### Attention Deficit Trait: Are Our Brains on Overload?

Edward M. Hallowell, founder of the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health, focused his study on a newly recognized phenomenon: attention deficit trait (ADT). ADT is similar to ADD, or attention deficit disorder, in its symptoms. According to Hallowell, ADT sufferers—and by the way, that appears to be a high percentage of professionals—are dealing with a constant and overwhelming amount of information. We are asking our brains to keep up with large amounts of data in a fast-paced environment (made even worse when multitasking). The result is that the

brain is in constant "flight or fight" mode, keeping us from the more in-depth, creative thinking that's necessary for problem solving.

Instead, many professionals are becoming more rigid in their thinking, more impulsive in their judgments and more angry in their interactions with others. They just want the current problem finished so they can move on to the next. The core symptoms of ADT, according to Hallowell, are distractibility, inner frenzy, impatience, and difficulty staying organized, setting priorities and managing time. The outcomes are often that individuals are not working up to their abilities and are making more mistakes.

What can be done about these inter-related issues—the bombardment of too much information and work coupled with the desire to multitask in an attempt to keep up with it all?

#### How to Quell the Urge to Overdo

First, assess how multitasking and information overload are affecting you and those you supervise. If you agree that these issues are causing problems, you must learn new habits to reduce the adverse effects. Following are some steps suggested by Hallowell, Meyer and this columnist.

- Foster connections. According to Hallowell, this is one of the premier ways of reducing the negative effects of ADT. Isolation raises anxiety.
- Get enough sleep and eat a good diet to build your reserves.
- Exercise. Even simple activities like walking up and down stairs or briskly down a hallway can help.
- Instill some order into your workday by keeping a section of your desk completely clear, maintaining a to-do list, and reserving a portion of the day exclusively for thinking and planning.

- Create specific e-mail hours so that you aren't checking messages all the time.

- Before leaving the office, create a priority list for tomorrow. No more than five major items should appear on your list.

- Break large tasks into smaller ones.

- Figure out when you perform the best during the day and do your most important work then.

- Slow down. Take time to really understand what you're working on. Listen, ask questions, digest what's being said or read.

- Create a system where you have one file on your desk at one time. Place the others in a file rack nearby.

- Feeling overwhelmed? Do an easy, rote task.

- Feeling anxious? Spend five minutes doing a crossword puzzle or something similar. This kind of activity quiets your mind by shutting off "alarmist" messages and puts you back into a calmer state.

- Ask for help, delegate a task, or brainstorm with a colleague.

- For your supervisees, create the type of atmosphere where asking for help is considered a good thing, not a weakness.

- Help those you supervise recognize when they may be experiencing some of these overload symptoms.

- Discourage multitasking generally. As the studies show, it's costing you time and costing the firm money. Finish one task and then go on to the next.

Be patient as you try these strategies. New habits take at least three to six weeks to form. But in the end, approaching work in a more thoughtful way will allow you to reduce information overload and the need to use the inefficient method of multitasking. **LP**

#### Action Plan

- Assess how information overload and the perils of multitasking are affecting you and those you supervise.

- Select steps for how to counteract the adverse effects of multitasking (considering the choices provided in the list at left).

- Work to create new habits, for both yourself and your staff.

- Learn more about alternatives to multitasking and information overload from these resources:

"New Studies Show Pitfalls of Doing Too Much at Once" by Sue Shellenbarger. *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2003.

"Overloaded Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform" by Edward M. Hallowell. *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005.

*Keeping Good Lawyers: Best Practices to Create Career Satisfaction* by M. Diane Vogt and Lori-Ann Rickard. ABA Law Practice Management Section, 2000.

*The Lawyer's Guide to Balancing Life and Work: Taking the Stress Out of Success* by George W. Kaufman, ABA, 1999.

*So Little Time, So Much Paper*, an audio program with Meg Spencer, ABA Law Practice Management Section, 2000.

*What Matters Most* by Hyrum W. Smith. Simon & Schuster, 2000.