

TIME MANAGEMENT

INTERRUPTIONS AND MULTI-TASKING

By Neil Potter

Introduction

It is a pretty crazy world out there. People are working longer hours and cramming as much as they can into their day. Unless you have taken on six full-time jobs, you might feel that you are slacking off.

Taking on more work, or just trying to do more in each day, can cause you to stretch and grow. However, just cramming more tasks into a day can also lead to poor performance when your focus is totally shot with interruptions, or when numerous tasks are started and few of them are completed adequately. Chronic interruptions and multi-tasking can lead to major goals being pushed out of sight and an overall increase in stress.

In this article, I describe two small selections from our Time Management workshop. These are two of many tactical steps that can be used routinely to smooth your week out. When they are performed, rehearsed and refined, you can patch two of the holes that might be sinking your boat.

- Make some of your time uninterrupted
- Manage multi-tasking Nirvana

Make some of your time uninterrupted

Are you continually interrupted at work? Do people find you, ask you to do small tasks, or pull you out of important meetings? Are you adequately sick of the interruptions to make a change?

Interruptions will always be present, however, there is probably something you can do to reduce the amount of interruptions and shift the times in the day when they happen. When you read the list below, don't judge too quickly and say, "I can't do that!" Realize that if you are not doing any of them, there is *something* you can do to make life a little better. Take the list, pick one thing and



try it. See how well it goes and refine it at least five more times until it works for you.

If you were meeting with the CEO, attending a performance review, talking with your mother face to face, having surgery, driving at 60 mph, or watching your favorite TV show, then you wouldn't be checking emails every two minutes or allowing anyone to interrupt you, would you? When you decide that something is important, you already do a great job of eliminating or reducing interruptions. So this is something you can do when you give it priority.

Look at your week and flag times when you could benefit from fewer interruptions. You might decide that every morning, from 8:30 to 10:30, is your most productive work time, and that is your targeted block of time for reducing interruptions. Or your target could be every other afternoon, or one full day every five days.

Once you have selected your target, think carefully how interruptions can be reduced. Here are a few suggestions. Your goal is to find at least one tactic that you can use and refine.

- Make yourself unavailable during your peak time on the public corporate calendar.
- Create an "Unavailable from 8:30-10:30 A.M." auto response email.
- Silence the phone.
- Only use email pop-ups that summarize emails, or turn off pop-ups altogether.
- Go to a different location (e.g., cafeteria, library, park,

unused office space).

- Inform co-workers of your peak time and ask them to avoid disturbing you during that period. Ask them about their preferred time and provide the same offer.
- Consider a “Don’t disturb until 10:30 A.M.” sign on your desk. When you see an interruption coming, point to the sign. Eventually, a few people will figure out what the sign means. They will probably go and get their own sign, and you might have created a new cultural norm.
- Shift your work hours by one hour on a few days each week to be able to work at home, or work in the office when it is quiet.
- If you can, change the layout of your desk so that you’re not facing visitors. Otherwise, you encourage eye contact with visitors and interruptions.

“But I must be available to everyone! That is my job; people expect it.” Well, maybe. But if you allowed yourself to be interrupted continually, and allowed interruptions to be interrupted, then you would never accomplish anything. Instead, think more objectively. Try blocking one morning each week for absolutely no interruptions. Then see if this causes planes to fall out of the sky or your desk to explode! My guess is that your colleagues assume you were just at the dentist, or they simply won’t notice because they are too interrupted themselves.

Manage multi-tasking Nirvana

“To do two things at once -- is to do neither,” Roman philosopher Publilius Syrus, 100 A.D.

I was recently at a Courtyard Marriott in Michigan and a younger person was at a table next to mine for breakfast. She had her laptop in front of her checking email, a Blackberry to her left ringing, the newspaper to her right, and she was on a conference call. I was impressed for two seconds, and then it occurred to me that it was quite possible that none of the events were being performed very well. I also wondered how much time was needed to lay all that equipment out and pack it all away. If that had been me, I would have dropped my phone in my coffee and knocked my cereal off into my lap with the newspaper. Then, with all my extra time, I could have gone to my room and changed clothes.

So you want to multi-task (and risk dunking your cell phone in coffee)? Answer this question: What is the final goal, to accomplish work, or to multi-task? My opinion is that the final goal is to accomplish work, and if you can multi-task to achieve that, then great. If not, just work on your goals in order of importance, work on them incrementally, and don’t tell anyone whether you are, or are not, multi-tasking.

When you look at the art of multi-tasking, realize that the amount of multi-tasking you can do is based on your wiring and skill set*. Some people can do two or three things well and transition between them, and some people can’t. The regular air traffic controller, CEO, orchestra conductor or drummer are not regular people, and feeling bad because you are not wired the same way is futile. Some people practice for hours to refine their multi-tasking skill, but even they will hit an upper limit.

To multi-task you have to practice managing the tasks at the same level of detail. For example, no one task in the list becomes more engaging or important than the others. That way you can transition between them faster. Experience with performing that type of work, as well as intelligence and natural wiring all have their part to play in multi-tasking. For example, a good drummer can run three beats at the same time (arms and foot). A really good drummer can make one hand play two rhythms. And a really good drummer practices five hours a day.

Multi-tasking can be improved by a) selecting only a few things to multi-task between at any one time (e.g., 2 or 3) b) grouping similar tasks together, for example, calls, errands, tasks within a project, and then multi-tasking between the groups, c) recording just enough information that describes where you left the previous task so that the transition time is reduced.

While you work to achieve the ultimate level of multi-tasking, remember:

- Some people are totally unproductive when they multi-task. If this is you, focus on getting work done (sequentially) instead!
- Some people try to handle more than they are wired to do. They look impressive, but the output is not great. Decide how good you really want the result to be.
- Multi-tasking can be practiced, but it should not be the end goal.
- Know that you pay a tax when you transition between multiple tasks. Based on your wiring, you might spend an extra 50% of your time if you read email while supervising toddlers at the playground. Is that really a good use of your time? It looks impressive in the beginning, but it can fall apart very quickly and lead to big problems.
- Reduce the transition time by recording your current state. For example, jot notes in the file you are using describing where you are (e.g., “Got to here – fix lines 1-10, add next feature, edit test case to deal with X”)
- Try scheduling a few large items per day (based on your peak time), and multi-task between those. Leave a gap for other things that arrive at your desk, otherwise they will distract you.

If you can simply get your tasks completed quickly (in any order), you will look like you are multi-tasking and have achieved the goal. *[Continued on page 3.]*

GETTING OUT OF THE SWAMP

By Mary Sakry

Swamp

Do you feel like you live in a swamp, but no one is addressing known issues?

Perhaps with the economic downturn people are getting frightened or feeling that they just need to keep their heads above water. What I see does baffle me a little. Many organizations have large, well-defined lists of problems that describe why they are losing time and money or experiencing customer complaints, but no one is addressing any of them. Instead, the decision is to trudge on.

When improvements are made to clear the swamp, action must be taken to either maintain the results or prevent deterioration. I see many companies make great strides, and then let it all slide back and allow the swamp to fill. These swamps consist of problems such as poor testing, poor scope management, chronic rework from defects, and an over-reliance on email to communicate technical concepts between teams at remote sites.

I have seen groups determine their problems, even get hundreds of people to buy in to the resulting improvement plans, and then drop the entire effort to meet the next business deadline. Some folks have done entire appraisals and have a very clear list of issues; others know their pain or pinch points from internal brainstorming sessions. Either way, it is very common to sit on a list for years and struggle, even though the list clearly states what improvements would have immediate benefit.

Fix the swamp

If you have such a list, go and look at it for 30 minutes and see if there is one item on it that could make a difference now. You don't have to do all of them, but one per month would make a huge difference. When you drain the swamp, keep improving, otherwise the swamp will refill.

Especially during hard economic times, improvements are essential for business survival. A competitor doing a few things better can provide just enough customer advantage related to cost, quality or delivery to beat you. If you are an IT group, and not a product group, you also have to keep the swamp drained to survive and compete with other IT providers.



Take a look at your swamp, find that old problem list your team created last year, see the relationship between the two then take a few steps and watch your group improve.

TIME MANAGEMENT (CONTINUED)

If by “multi-tasking,” you mean double and triple-booking yourself in overlapping appointments, realize that this is a recipe for disaster and is the fast track to destroying your credibility. Multi-tasking is when you can do two or three things at once, not when you promise to do two or three things and then ignore most of them.

Each week, look back at your work style when you were getting the most done. Look at your work style when you made many mistakes and were totally stressed. Where did multi-tasking play a role in these results? You might be a great multi-tasker and have no need to change. You might be OK and want to focus on reducing your transition times. You might decide that just achieving work is adequate, whether you truly multi-task or not.

*Multi-tasking pod cast, *The Infinite Mind*:
www.lcmedia.com/mind464.htm

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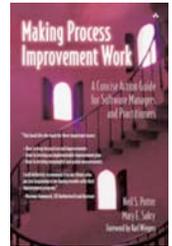
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