

# And One More Thing!



## *Managing the Multitasking Monster*



## And One More Thing! Managing the Multitasking Monster

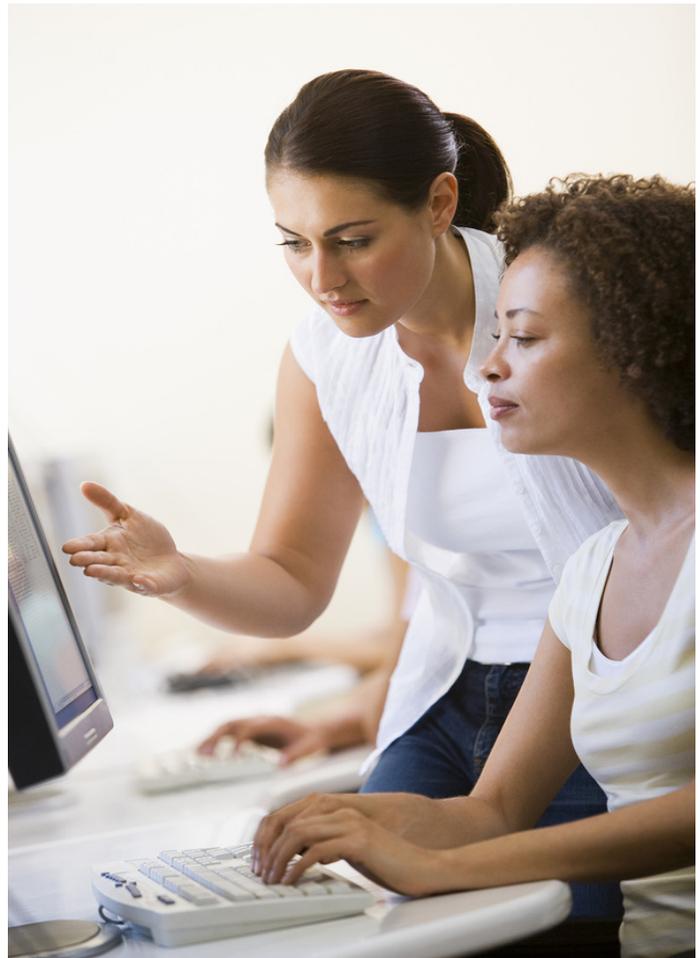
Robert W. Wendover

It has become standard practice. You answer the phone while typing an e-mail and searching for a document on your computer. If someone leans into your office, you deal with that at the same time. When one of those tasks is completed, you automatically search for something to fill the void. Leave no second unoccupied.

The same is true at home. You prepare dinner, while catching up on Facebook as the washer runs in the background and you help your daughter with her calculus homework. Waiting in the car for a child? Standing on line at McDonald's? Surely there are a couple of things you can do rather than simply looking out the window at the beautiful day.

The problem is that all this frenetic activity doesn't accomplish as much as you think. In fact, it's actually making you a shallow thinker. The reason? Working memory won't allow it. Working memory, sometimes called short-term memory, contains what neuro-researchers call

The simple truth is that multi-tasking prevents you from being more effective in whatever you're doing.



a cognitive load. Brain research over the past decade has revealed that a human's cognitive load can hold no more than four individual stimuli at any one time. This includes everything from the temperature in the room and the noise from a passing vehicle to background music *and* the person's voice with whom you are speaking. If another stimulus intrudes, such as a loud noise, attention to one of the other stimuli will be lost. This will most likely be whatever your associate is saying.

If you attend to one thing, such as a conversation or something you're reading, then that data has a better chance of reaching long-term memory to be stored for future recall. But if you're trying to attend to more than one thing at the same time, chances are comprehension for all stimuli will be impaired. Think about the last time you began a conversation and was distracted by an incoming text. You probably found yourself saying, "I'm sorry. What did you say?" after looking up from the screen in your hand. The simple truth is that multi-tasking

prevents you from being more effective in whatever you're doing.

## **But Everybody Does It**

I know, everyone around you seems to do it. You certainly want to keep up. You don't want to look inferior in front of all those super achievers. But as my mother used to say, "If those kids jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge, would you jump off the Brooklyn Bridge?" I'll be the first to admit that battling the multi-tasking monster takes guts and perseverance, especially when your boss prides herself on doing six things at the same time.

Our society has become enamored with how productive we think we have become. With the economic downturn of the past few years, there has been an increasing emphasis on doing more with less. But to what end? Technology companies have also led us down this path by promising endless gains in output if we just use their products. Yet in spite of all these advances, most of us still feel overwhelmed and frustrated about not gaining traction on the work that counts. Many describe it as a treadmill.

The problem is we need to think smarter, not

The keys to making this transition are learning to compartmentalize and manage distractions.



harder, faster, or with super-human capacity. We are no longer living in the manufacturing economy where we count the widgets produced hourly. Today's work is based on outcome rather than output in most settings. Better outcomes require better decisions. Better decisions require better thinking. Better thinking requires deeper concentration, something that is destroyed by attempts to multitask.

## **Managing the Monster**

So how do you manage that deep-seated urge to keep five balls in the air? And what about those around you who insist on trying even when the evidence clearly demonstrates that multitasking is a myth?

First, get past the notion that you can accomplish five things at the same time. Take a serious look at how you work during the day. Ask yourself the following questions:

**1. How often do I find myself trying to concentrate on more than one task at the same time?**

**What is the typical result?**

Be honest.

**2. Who has set the expectation that I multi-task?**

**Is this being enforced by a manager, spouse or kids? Or is it self-imposed?**

**3. What would happen if I simply stopped multitasking? Remember to think of both the negative *and* positive outcomes.**

Finally, spend a few minutes at the end of every day reflecting on your attempts to multitask. Evaluate how effective you've been. Be honest. Don't rationalize it away. By the way, don't perform this analysis while you're updating your LinkedIn profile and editing a report. Don't feel like you have the time or self-discipline to do this? Stop reading here, just continue what you've been doing, but without the whining. (Sorry, it has to be said.)

When you telegraph through your actions that it is better to compartmentalize than multitask, those around you will begin to emulate your behavior.



The keys to making this transition are learning to compartmentalize and manage distractions. If you take time to observe those who consistently make effective decisions, you'll discover that two of their secrets are these habits. Compartmentalizing a task allows you to completely focus on the decision or decisions to be made. After all, when you look at any job close up, it is composed decision after decision daisy-chained together. The only difference between the decisions of an individual contributor and a senior manager is that the stakes may be higher and the sphere of influence larger.

The mechanics are the same. The effectiveness of both are impaired by attempts to multitask. By blocking out the distractions around you and the urge to do more than one thing, you'll achieve a greater sense of peace and focus. Imagine sitting down to complete a project knowing that you will not be distracted. Think how good it will feel to push all other tasks out of the way for an hour, a morning, even a day! Don't think

it can be done? Those who make consistently smart decisions do it all the time. Ignore those who tell you that they think better when they're busy. They may be making more decisions, but quantity does not equal quality when it comes to thinking.

Don't think you can do it? Choose a couple of significant tasks or decisions to be made in the next week and begin with those. You might need to develop the interview questions for a position you're filling, for instance. Perhaps you need to purchase a new car and you're unsure how to proceed. Pick an hour or two and set aside all distractions. Remove yourself from the environment if you're likely to be interrupted.

Turn off your smart phone (Really!) and let your mind calm down. You might keep a pad next to you to jot reminders if they come to mind. But other than that, focus on just the project at hand. Don't expect a sudden burst of creativity. You might use a problem solving framework such as the one in my book, *Figure It Out*. Over time, you'll discover that this practice will become easier and easier. You'll probably look forward to it. This is not rocket science. Deciding *not* to multitask is more about self-discipline than



technique.

## Permit Others to Stop

Second, give those you supervise the permission, even encouragement, to focus on individual tasks. There may be surprise, even resistance at first. Old habits die hard. When faced with the option to focus on one thing at a time, some may find it difficult to switch gears even though they know they'll get a better outcome with less stress. Discuss this with them up front. They may be hesitant simply because they fear this is a passing fad. You need to assure them that it is not.

When you telegraph through your actions that it is better to compartmentalize than multitask, those around you will begin to emulate your behavior. Will there still be interruptions? Yes. Might you get pressure from others when someone discovers that you and your team are working differently from all the other multitasking

# Protect your team from the expectation that they multitask.

super achievers? Perhaps. You might explain that you have determined that you make better decisions when you focus on one project or task at a time. Keep an informal record of the outcomes you and your team achieve. If you can demonstrate to others that what you're doing works, they're more likely to respect your space. They might even want to try it themselves.

## **Protect Your Team**

Third, protect your team from the expectation that they multitask. It is the culture within many organizations to do more with less, regardless of whether this is effective. No one expects you to change this culture, but you can certainly protect those you supervise from many of these pressures. The key to doing this is collaboration. Talk with your team about the environment in which they best perform. Ask for their ideas on how to find good ways to concentrate on one task or decision at a time. Suggest that they find ways to cover each other when it is necessary to get away and think for a while. Give them permission to get creative. This might mean working in a coffee shop, food court, library, or someplace off site. It might mean coming in an hour late or disappearing for an extra half hour during lunch. More and more organizations are recognizing that the traditional work hours of nine-to-five or eight-to-four are a relic of a bygone era.

It is important, of course, to remind your people that finding ways to get away and focus on individual projects and decisions is predicated on productive outcomes. Encourage them to find ways to quantify the outcomes they are achieving due to a shift away from multitasking and then share them with you. Working with more focus on specific projects is not an all-or-nothing enterprise. There are always times when we have no choice. But the more we can do to isolate times for decisions of significance, the more consistently we will be able to emulate those who make smart decisions. For additional strategies on managing the multitasking monster, watch the video segment attached to Chapter 7 of *Figure It Out*.

Will these three steps extinguish the presence

of multitasking within you and your team? Of course not. But the simple recognition that multitasking is a myth will encourage both you and those you supervise to avoid the temptation and focus more on compartmentalizing tasks. Those who make consistently smart decisions don't multitask. They compartmentalize. How about you?

## **About the Author**

Robert W. Wendover has been researching and writing about workforce trends for more than 25 years. He currently serves as Principal of Common Sense Enterprises. He is the award-winning author of ten books including *Smart Hiring*, *Two Minute Motivation* and *Figure It Out! Making Smart Decisions in a Dumbed-Down World*. He is a regular contributor to print and electronic media. He has served as a special advisor to the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) and on the management faculty of the University of Phoenix for more than ten years.

## **Common Sense Enterprises, Inc.**

Common Sense Enterprises assists employers with the challenges of leading and managing the continually evolving workforce. We specifically focus on the topics of cross-generational teams and supervision, the recruitment and retention of top performing talent, and improving daily decisions within the workplace.

We deliver our services through a combination of live presentations, webinars, print and electronic publications, curriculums delivered through learning management platforms, and a limited amount of consulting.

We have a passion for measureable results so that our clients receive maximum value for their investment. We accomplish this through initial assessments, interviews, on-going client consultations, surveys, and measurement tools delivered through our learning management system. We pride ourselves on providing cutting-edge and customized content and insights that are easy to understand and reasonable to implement.