

The High Cost of Nano-Flipping

by Anne Sedler

What?

Not too long ago, I called my brother during the workday. As we discussed an upcoming business opportunity, one of his other lines began to ring. I immediately lost my train of thought because I expected him to ask me to hold while he answered the call. He didn't.

Feeling a little insecure, I asked him if he needed to pick it up. He responded with the perfect answer. He said, "No, right now I'm talking to you."

So What?

This was powerful to me and almost beyond belief. I could have jumped through the phone and hugged my little brother. You might relate to the pleasant *shock* of not being pushed aside.

How do you feel when you are with a friend or business associate who is compelled to answer his cell phone in the middle of a conversation? Have you ever been with someone who thinks it's a good idea to be doing almost anything else while talking to you? Don't you hate it? Do you feel frustrated and, at times, underappreciated? As a matter of fact, it happens so much you probably *expect* to be put on hold when a phone rings. You are part of the multitasking culture we live in. It's pervasive to such a degree that many of us do it, and many of us are victims of it.

In reality, we don't do several tasks at once when we multitask. Our brains switch back and forth among the many things we are trying to do "at one time." We wrench our minds, starting and stopping while going from one thing to the other. This nano-flipping is extremely counter-productive. Simply stated ...it allows one to mess up two or more things at the same time. Busy people often multitask because they are busy people. So, if you are a busy person, you might think you must multitask to use your time wisely. You are probably surrounded with tools that make multitasking easy. Your cell phone allows you to make important business calls while you drive, or your computer allows you to answer e-mail messages, surf the net and talk on the phone simultaneously. It is possible to be connected to more than one activity 24/7 with the wonders of technology. But, are you getting a little stressed trying to "do it all" and juggle your way through life?

If you work in a hectic office with many people around you, you probably multitask more than you might imagine. An article written by Clive Thompson appeared in the October 16, 2005, issue of *The New York Times*. It told the story of University of California Professor Gloria Marks, who was beleaguered by interruptions at work. She repeatedly found that at the end of a day, she accomplished only a mere fraction of what she had planned. "Madness," she

thought. "I'm trying to do 30 things at once." Her frustration over multitasking was overwhelming. At the same time, Professor Marks heard complaints from others that multitasking was driving them crazy.

Originally a researcher, Professor Marks decided to get to the bottom of the multitasking curse. She wanted to know just how time consuming it is. So Marks and her assistant studied two high-tech companies where employees worked side-by-side in cubicles. After 1,000 hours of observation, the conclusions were startling. Each worker tackled a task for an average of 11 minutes before an interruption occurred. Even worse, each 11-minute task was fragmented into shorter tasks. Once distracted, the subjects typically took 25 minutes to get refocused.

It's easy to conclude that day after day of nano-flipping can cause a lot of problems. Walk through an office at 4 p.m. or visit the break room and listen to the chatter. If you listen, you'll know that the workforce is weary, stressed-out and just plain ragged.

There are dozens of pitfalls associated with the steady habit of multitasking. The more you juggle tasks, the less efficient you will be at completing the tasks thoroughly and on time. This is because multitasking dramatically reduces your concentration. It becomes impossible to focus your attention long enough when your brain is forced into nano-flipping mode. The pressure can sometimes be significant enough to cause physical discomforts such as headaches, stomachaches and sleeplessness – just to name a few.

But, multitasking takes another less obvious toll. It destroys the bottom-line results of big and small companies. Consider a worker within an organization who makes \$25 per hour, but loses a conservative 60 minutes a day to distractions. The cost is over \$6,000 wasted per year. Now multiply that number by the total number of employees making \$25 per hour. The mere dollar amounts are astonishing without factoring in stress-related illnesses or the negative impact multitasking chaos has on customers.

Whether you are an executive, business owner, employee, educator or student, nano-flipping will:

- Make you less efficient.
- Make you forgetful.
- Create high levels of unproductive stress.
- Reduce brain power available for individual tasks.
- Cause mental burnout and depression.
- Make you physically ill.

If this isn't enough, I have another reason to get off the multitasking merry-go-round. It can be offensive.

Remember the experience with my brother and my insecurity over losing the attention of someone because of a disruption? It highlights the damage you can cause to a personal or business relationship when you give in to interruptions that take your focus off the one who should be, for the moment, your most important priority. Because of my brother's response, I felt I was very important to him.

My eyes were opened to what others feel about themselves and about me when roles are reversed. I know for sure that more than once I have been on the phone while typing on my computer keyboard. No doubt the person on the other end of the line heard the tapping

sound. Three things are true of an event like this one. I didn't hear even a fraction of what the other party had to say, my data entry was inaccurate, and I was insulting and rude. I'm ashamed of myself. How could I think it's OK to treat people this way?

Now What?

"To do two things at once is to do neither," according to the Roman philosopher Publilius Syrus. Publilius made this observation 2,000 years ago. I guess what's old is new again. To truly focus, you will need to devote your attention to one task until you complete it.

It's possible to change from a nano-flipping fanatic to a focused, purposeful individual. Habits can be changed with time and perseverance. There are some simple, comforting strategies to living a more time-efficient, highly productive life that is free of stress, headaches, stomachaches and people who are annoyed with us.

A few great tips for being a good worker, a great partner, a super parent, and the best friend a person can have are:

- Stay singularly focused. "Right now I'm talking to you. Right now I'm writing a business plan. Right now I'm cleaning the garage. Right now I'm listening to my little girl tell me about her day at school."
- Prioritize your workload. Figure out the important stuff and do it early with your total, complete, uninterrupted attention. You might find that by lunchtime you have the day licked. That's priceless!
- Learn to estimate time well. Structure your schedule so that there is a little bit of time between tasks. Nothing will rev up nano-flipping faster than a time-crunch debacle.
- Remove distractions when you need to be focused. Turn off the phone and fax ringer, shut down the computer, tack up the "Do Not Disturb" sign. If someone really needs you, ask if you can get back to them in 30 minutes, in an hour or after lunch. Don't forget to follow up on your promise to follow up.
- If you must, on rare occasions...only because there is no other way...multitask. But, if you do, be sure you do it without harming anyone or your own reputation as a productive, efficient, focused, reliable, polite person.

Envision yourself offering the gift of your undivided attention to your client "right now," instead of jumping at every distraction. Picture the outcome of your next big project as you do it every step of the way with full concentration, giving it clear and purposeful effort. You'll shine like a star. You will be noticed by people in high places. Best of all, *you* will see yourself as a dynamic contributor to your organization.

See yourself. You travel home from work each and every evening with that precious, extraordinary sensation of achievement...you are a person FULFILLED!

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Countless individuals waste a lot of time at work doing things the hard way. The result is they are left with very little time for the important people: family, friends and themselves. Relationships and recreational activities that are satisfying and enriching are left to chance.

Anne Sedler is obsessed with the belief that everyone can live a first-rate life. That is why she founded HFD Productivity Associates. They help businesspeople create and sustain efficient, intentional work environments so they can achieve their professional goals and enjoy richly rewarding personal lives.

Anne is on a continuous quest for knowledge and is always curious about being organized and productive. As a member of the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), an authorized consultant for *Taming the Paper Tiger*, *Easy Reach*, the *GO System*, and the Pendaflex Productivity Institute, she has a wealth of resources.

Anne has been eagerly consulting, training, speaking and writing about her passion since 1998.