The Impact of Multi-Tasking

“Wanted: ability to multi-task in a fast-paced environment.” How many times have you seen this requirement in want ads? With a do-more-with-less requirement, management teams in many organizations believe that multi-tasking is the answer to their productivity problems. Recent studies have shown, however, that carrying on several tasks at once may reduce productivity, not increase it.

Let's look at an example: You are concentrating on a priority project. You hear the "bing" of an incoming e-mail. First, you stop concentrating on the task at hand. Then, you turn your thoughts to reading the on-screen message. You read the e-mail reminder for the company picnic. When you return to your priority, you must shift your focus again. You have to review where you left-off before the e-mail arrived to reach the level of concentration you had prior to the interruption.

When to Multi-Task:

- When performing routine tasks. If your brain is familiar with performing an activity, it takes less effort to do it and work on another task simultaneously.

- When standing in line or waiting for a meeting to begin, bring reading materials to fully occupy your time. Or, order supplies while photocopying a large document.

- When the outcome isn't critical. Sorting paperclips while reading your junk mail, for example.

When Not To Multi-Task:

- When the task requires clear focus and concentration or when you are in a hurry. When you are rushing to complete a project, your stress hormones are already interfering with your brain's ability to process information and work efficiently. Multi-tasking makes the situation worse.

- When you are on the telephone. You may try to finish typing a memo while talking on the phone, but your caller can easily recognize your distraction, and you could lose more than time by not giving the caller your full attention.

Determining when and when not to encourage your employees to multi-task may help you save hours of precious time. Perhaps the most effective workers are not those who can multi-task, but those who can quickly and accurately complete one task at a time.