

# The Myth of Multitasking

By Michael Laff

Focusing attention on one task until it was completed used to be a sign of determination. Now, it's often considered unproductive.

In a world where employees scan emails while paying scant attention to a conference call, the value of concentration is being lost. But, according to one researcher, the concept of multitasking is a fad: Everyone says they do it, but not everybody should be doing it.

Louis Csoka, founder of Charlotte-based Apex Performance, says people brag about their abilities to juggle multiple tasks in conversations with friends or peers. A recent Apex Performance survey of 516 American workers revealed that almost 75 percent of participants reported that they multitask frequently or all the time—an indication that people are much busier or just think they are.

“People really believe they’re doing more,” Csoka says. “The problem is managers now expect people to do more at once, and the brain isn’t wired to do that.”

When Apex conducted research on attention spans, it found that people who were asked to type an email during a conference call were only retaining about one-third of the information shared during the call. While typing an email may seem routine, the mental energy needed to complete the task limits what can be done at the same time.

“The problem is people are missing too much information and then making a decision,” Csoka says. “Years ago, before technology was used widely, we

sorted information more carefully before making a decision.”

More women—47 percent—said they were effective multitaskers, compared to 29 percent of men. The percentages also were high among higher paid staff and workers with advanced degrees.

Csoka interpreted the data as a sign that an increasing number of women are juggling the demands of management in addition to raising a family and managing a household.

What many employees consider to be multitasking is actually rapid shifting between the target task and the sensory modes (visual, audial, or tactical) that are required to com-

plete a task, according to Csoka. Being able to complete one task quickly and then move onto the next item is a product of heightened concentration, not superior intellect, Csoka says.

*Michael Laff is an associate editor of T+D; mlaff@astd.org.*

## The BIG Number

# 38%

of individuals report multitasking all of the time.

### >>How Often Do You Multitask?

All the time	38%
Frequently	34%
Occasionally	13%
Never/Don't Know	15%

Source: Apex Performance



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