Let's Schmooze

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the Pros & Cons of Multi-tasking

We've all multi-tasked at some time, many times much more than we realize. We perform some routine task while thinking of something else ~ such as driving a familiar route while mentally wrestling with a problem that has nothing to do with the driving task at hand. We watch TV and talk on the phone at the same time, or maybe do some routine household chore while listening to the radio or stereo, or watching the kids play outside.

Our young ones have become quite skilled at simultaneously talking and texting on their smart phones, sometimes behind their very own backs! In fact, today's modern electronics demand that all of us constantly multi-task ~ if we want to keep up with all our many clamorous, electronic toys.

Apparently, we've become quite proficient at multi-tasking in today's busy world. Life is so much faster and noisier than it was just a mere century ago, and it takes a lot of multi-tasking to keep up.

However, multi-tasking may not be what it appears to be. While glorified by artificial intelligence and human resource departments, and demanded by many employers ~ many times human multi-tasking is actually *sequential* tasking that sequences so rapidly that it takes on the magical appearance of multi-tasking.

Let's look at an analogous example from the motion picture industry. When we watch a movie, movement per se appears to flow smoothly ~ but ~ that is only if the still frames are flying past the projector lens at a rate of more than 17 frames per second. At 17+ frames per second, smooth movement magically appears because the human eye cannot refresh fast enough to keep up with the frame flow. However, in reality, the smooth flow of

movement is an optical illusion ~ caused by the still frames flying past the projector lens at a very high speed ~ more than 17 frames per second.

Multi-tasking is of a similar nature. In reality, many times human multi-tasking is really sequential, but if the jumping from task to task is speedy, an observer may magically see and assume multi-tasking. However, high-speed human sequential tasking has its drawbacks.

Real productivity goes down. There is a tremendous loss of brain energy and time spent in the actual jumping around from task to task. That mental jumping-around-time could have been spent on a real task. Let's look at an analogy. One can fly to a distance destination much more quickly with a non-stop ticket than with a route that has multiple stops and transfers. Non-stop airline tickets save a lot of time and energy.

Second, error rates go up. As we endlessly skip from one task to another in an attempt to get them all completed simultaneously, we inadvertently get our tasks mixed up and do to one task what should have actually been done to another task. Many home chefs have seen their culinary masterpieces go up in smoke because they were distracted by their unconscious multi-tasking ~ visiting with a friend who just happened to drop in, distracted by a hot scene on the kitchen TV, or caught up in a task located away from the kitchen

The term multi-tasking brings fresh meaning to the cliche "jack of all trades, but master of none." Instead of glorifying multi-tasking, we need to appreciate the choice to focus selectively and intelligently on one task at a time, until all tasks are finished well. Then, instead of being a "jack of all trades, but master of none" ~ we will have become the "master of all."

Let's save multi-tasking for those times and tasks where performance and quality don't really matter ~ like mopping a floor while hollering at the kids. If we really get into our hollering, it won't really matter if we missed a spot on the floor during the excitement. We'll hit that spot next time, right!

When task performance and quality really matter, we had better put multi-tasking aside, and dedicate our time and energy to that one demanding task. We'll get much better

results, and won't end up with a situation that has to be re-worked by ourselves, or someone else.

Today's modern world is pressing all of us to multi-task all the time. Let's push back, take control of our lives, triage which tasks are of small importance and which tasks are of great importance, and organize our time and tasking approach appropriately.

We'll be much happier with the results, and with the newly acquired feeling that we have recaptured control of our individual lives.

~ 'til we meet again ~