



Face-To-Face

Ban BlackBerrys!

Mark Lewis, 10.08.09, 6:00 PM ET

Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease. To avoid wasting time in meetings, hardcore multitaskers sit there with their faces glued to their BlackBerrys, reading e-mails while they follow the discussion with one ear. But all they are doing is making the meeting longer for everyone else.

"Being busy and being productive are not the same," says Denise Landers, a time-management consultant based in Houston. "I definitely believe that banning BlackBerrys from a conference room would lead to shorter and more effective meetings. We simply cannot multitask and perform at 100%."

A recent Stanford University study supports Landers's point. The researchers were trying to determine what it is about habitual multitaskers that allows them to do so many things at once. But the researchers found that the alleged productivity of multitaskers was an illusion. Not only are these people far less productive than they think they are, but they actually are less productive than co-workers who concentrate on one task at a time. The multitaskers are too easily distracted by irrelevant information.

Multitaskers think they are doing two or more things simultaneously, when actually they are switching rapidly back and forth between tasks, says Dave Crenshaw, a productivity consultant from Eagle Mountain, Utah, and the author of *The Myth of Multitasking*. Each time they switch, Crenshaw says, they lose time and focus.

"It's very damaging in meetings," he says. "What happens is meetings get longer," as the multitaskers reluctantly tear themselves from their BlackBerrys or iPhones to focus on the live discussion. Everyone else must pause while the distracted multitasker is brought up to speed: "They keep saying, 'Can you repeat that?'"

It's a vicious circle: Managers spend much of their day in meetings, so they multitask in an effort to be more efficient, which actually makes them less efficient and forces them to spend even more time in meetings.

"The number of meetings and the time they consume are one of the big complaints I get from clients who struggle with time management and fitting everything into a day," Landers says. "If you could move quickly through the meeting points, knowing that you have everyone's full attention, and then let everyone move on to the next activity, it would be a better use of time."

People who participate in teleconferences and videoconferences are especially susceptible to multitasking. If no one can see what you're doing, it's very tempting to answer e-mails while the other people are talking. "It's obvious that it's very easy to disengage with what's going on," says Crenshaw, who has been a presenter at many such virtual meetings. "It puts more pressure on the presenter to be compelling and engaging."

Part of the problem, of course, is that companies schedule too many meetings and invite too many people to attend them. A University of Arizona study found that managers spend 20% of their time in formal meetings of five people or more. That's a lot of time away from your computer. It's no wonder that people turn to multitasking as a solution. But it's not a solution; it only compounds the problem.

Crenshaw suggests that managers fight back by banning the use of all portable communication devices for the duration of the meeting.

Another recent study, this one by the University of Texas at Austin, offers hope. Titled "The Social Influences of Electronic Multitasking in Organizational Meetings," this report concludes that people don't multitask because they have to; they multitask simply because they can. They see other people reading e-mail during meetings, so they do it too. But if the office culture discourages multitasking during meetings, they will stop, and focus on the issue at hand.

Even deeply ingrained habits are subject to change over time, Crenshaw notes. As every fan of *Mad Men* knows, smokers once routinely lit up during meetings. Now they don't. The same thing can happen to multitasking.

"I view myself as an evangelist," he says. "It's going to take probably another decade of talking about this before people get the message."

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