



Mindfulness: An Antidote to Multi-tasking

Have you heard the news? Multi-tasking is dead. As fun and productive as it may seem, and as commonly promoted as it is in organisations and society, the research shows conclusively that it does far more harm than good.

by **Angela Spaxman**

The case against multi-tasking

A team of researchers at Stanford University set out to discover what mental advantages frequent media multi-taskers have over those who usually do one thing at a time. Much to their surprise, no matter where they looked, they could not find any. What they discovered instead is that frequent multi-tasking results in less efficiency, lower quality of results and poorer concentration. All of these factors directly affect the bottom line.

In addition, multi-tasking drains energy and makes the experience of working more hectic and less enjoyable. With the ever-growing challenge and complexity of our organisations, workplaces cannot afford to drain energy and reduce the joy of work. Such a trend would inevitably lead to poorer results and many other problems for HR professionals.

Significantly for managers, or anyone with time management challenges, multi-tasking also results in less ability to recognise proprieties and set them strategically. Multi-taskers lose the ability to see the overview of all the tasks. They are handicapped in being able to choose how to use their time most effectively.

Another study from the Institute of Psychiatry found that excessive distractions temporarily reduced workers' intelligence. Those distracted by incoming emails and phone calls saw a 10-point fall in their intelligence quotient (IQ) – more than twice the loss found in studies of the impact of smoking marijuana. The study used the term “infomania” to point to the addictive quality of information distractions. It is hard to resist the urge to get new information, and easy to lose track of what is really important. The Stanford study also found that multi-

tasking is habit-forming, such that the more we do it, the more we develop the tendency.

This evidence clearly shows how harmful multi-tasking is to organisational productivity, effectiveness and well-being, and yet most workplaces are not addressing the relentless onslaught of information and the overall pressure to multi-task. In fact, multi-tasking is often encouraged.

Our workplaces perpetuate a culture of multi-tasking

One look around the typical Hong Kong workplace makes it clear how deeply engrained the multi-tasking culture is. Open-plan offices mean constant distractions from over-heard conversations, and no physical barriers to interruptions from colleagues. Many workplaces expect almost instant responses to emails or messages, meaning workers must constantly monitor a stream of incoming information.

In meetings large or small, the myth persists that it is possible to listen at the same time as you read or type. It is not. The mind can only take in one input at a time. People who are reading during a meeting will inevitably miss much of the content of the meeting itself as their mind is forced to switch back and forth at a rapid pace to follow one stream of information at a time. Much of the information, especially subtle or complex ideas, is likely to be missed. When meeting participants are multi-tasking, meetings are ineffective, they are longer than necessary, participants forget to raise relevant questions and miss the opportunity to engage deeply in shared thinking.

In summary, an article from *McKinsey*

Quarterly (January 2011) says: “Always-on, multi-tasking work environments are killing productivity, dampening creativity, and making us unhappy.”

The good news is that managers and workers are beginning to recognise the negative impacts of infomania and multi-tasking, and have begun developing different ways to work.

Mindfulness is an antidote and an opportunity

The opposite of multi-tasking is to work with mindfulness. At the most basic level mindfulness means paying attention to one thing at a time. Mindfulness is practised by sitting quietly, attending to the current moment, calming the mind and training the brain to focus despite the constant stream of thoughts and distractions that most people experience. Mindfulness can also be practised within other activities including meetings, working, eating and more, simply by paying attention to the present moment. This habit of being mindful in the midst of work leads to better focus and concentration, more clarity of the big picture, less cognitive stress and more enjoyment.

The scientific evidence for the benefits of mindfulness training dates from the 1980s and Jon Kabat-Zinn's now popular mindfulness training programmes are being used in the health sector. Health-related benefits include reduced stress, improved sleep quality, improved immune defence and balanced blood pressure.

Interest in mindfulness has increased in the corporate sector in recent years, perhaps driven by our increasingly fast-paced, complex and competitive worldwide marketplace. More research is showing evidence of different benefits that are very relevant for the workplace.

These include increased focus and concentration, the perfect antidote to our multi-tasking environments, and improved emotional stability, something particularly relevant for managers and leaders for whom relationships are a key driver of economic value.

Some top international leadership gurus are advocating mindfulness practice as a key to advanced leadership effectiveness. They include Jeremy Hunter, PhD of the Peter Drucker Graduate School of Management who has said that “focused human attention is the fundamental source of productive power in a knowledge economy”. Hunter teaches several forms of mindfulness training to his leadership students, many of whom

are top international executives.

Also, Bill Joiner, co-author of *Leadership Agility*, said: “in our multi-year research on leadership, we found that the most ‘agile’ leaders – those who were most effective in complex, rapidly changing conditions – had regular mindfulness practices, which they had sustained, in everyday life, for many years.” This book explains in detail how mindfulness practice can lead to greater self-awareness, general awareness, emotional self-regulation and a broader perspective. These are all keys to high levels of leadership ability, but also benefit workers at all levels.

Some trend-setting technology companies including Google and Facebook have instituted in-house mindfulness training programmes to help their staff members train their minds in ways that can best accommodate the information age which they themselves are advancing. Companies like the Potential Project, a global organisation based in Denmark, are offering training programmes specifically designed to help corporations harness the benefits of mindfulness for the sake of organisational effectiveness. Certainly, it would take a coordinated company-wide effort to counteract the culture of multi-tasking and shift to a more focused, mindful and smart way of working.

4 steps to mindful working

Corporate-based mindfulness training programmes should include at least the following elements:

1. Seated mindfulness training where the attention is trained to focus on one thing only, usually the breath, for a

period of time.

2. A mindful working culture, where colleagues respect each other’s focus, avoid distractions and set priorities mindfully.
3. Mindful meetings, where colleagues use their full attention on the matters at hand, whether one-on-one or in groups.
4. Mindful breaks, providing for regular shifts of attention between the thinking mind and the present moment.

Is mindfulness the key to 21st century survival?

The development of instant, always-on technology is relentless. Distracting information is ever more attractive and available, capturing and even muddling our minds with information. At the same time, increasing global competition is demanding increasing effectiveness and creativity from employees and organisations. While these pressures increase, time to reflect and relax seems always more scarce and somehow undervalued. Is mindfulness the tool that modern human beings now need to be successful and happy in the 21st century? **HR**

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