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Retail
Technology

Events

Career Events
Career Fairs
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Fenway 9/27
▶ Nursing & Allied
Health - 10/26
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Employer Info.
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Planning
Resumes
Networking
Interviewing
Salary
Coaching
Continuing Ed.
Tools

Pressured to multitask, workers juggle a fragmented existence

By Maggie Jackson, Globe Correspondent, 9/26/04

We all know the signs. During a telephone call, you hear the faint tap, tap of fingers across a keyboard. Launch into a staff meeting and you see heads down, as employees fixate on e-mail. Glance at your handheld during a game -- and you've missed your daughter's only goal of the season.

It's the dark side of today's constant juggling: multitasking each other. In our drive to keep up with huge workloads and barrages of information, we're not just tackling data sets and draft memos simultaneously throughout the day. We're giving half an ear and part-time focus to colleagues and family -- with rising levels of frustration for all concerned.

Joe Maggio, a senior executive at Raytheon Co., multitasks constantly, sometimes driving while conducting two simultaneous telephone meetings and sending e-mails at red lights. But he knows that his daily routine has its costs: he sometimes is not "all there." Recently he tried to soothe a dissatisfied customer by telephone during a visit to another business, but he couldn't give it his full attention and had to help the customer all over again later.

"I didn't give the situation due justice," says Maggio, based in Marlborough.

There's no question that people feel pressured to multitask to get more done. Forty-five percent of workers feel they are asked or expected to work on too many tasks at once, according to a 2002 study by the Families and Work Institute. As a result, multitasking is epidemic: 54 percent of workers read e-mail while on the phone and 11 percent write to-do lists during meetings, according to a 2003 survey by ComPsych, a Chicago provider of employee assistance programs.

Multitasking creates its own stresses. Workdays are increasingly fragmented, with tasks left incomplete as employees hurry from project to project, says Gloria Mark, an associate professor at the University of California at Irvine. She found that workers at a California financial institution switched tasks every three minutes -- and interrupted their own work as often as they had to answer to external interruptions.

There's another reason why we're not "all there" while multitasking. The human

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brain can't switch tasks quickly without a "warm-up period" in-between, and we can't simultaneously perform similar tasks -- such as reading and listening -- without overload, scientists say.

Juggling social interactions is hard because of their mental and emotional complexity, says David Meyer, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan who has studied multitasking. He compares social multitasking to chitchat at a cocktail party. "You don't get much out of any of the conversations," says Meyer.

With frustrations rising, some bosses are banning gadgets from meetings, and some hard-core multitaskers are scaling back. Brenna Hill stopped e-mailing during phone calls because of colleagues' and friends' ire. She still loves multitasking but says her "addiction" erodes her ability to sit still, focus, or reflect. "It's a handicap, also," says Hill, executive director of the American Association for Health Freedom, a Great Falls, Va. nonprofit.

Others simply find that multitasking is overrated.

"I try very hard to focus on one thing at a time so that what I'm doing is done right," says Cindy Harris, assistant to the chief executive of ISO New England Inc., a nonprofit that manages the region's power grid. After one too many conversations with inattentive callers, she refuses to multitask on the phone.

"I can hear them on their PC. They might ask me to repeat what I just said. They're not focused on what I'm asking," says Harris. "They're wasting their time and mine."

Maggie Jackson's Balancing Acts column appears every other week. She can be reached at maggie.jackson@att.net.

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