The Case for Multitasking

Il-timed phone calls and colleagues popping in are classic productivity killers, the bane of many managers’ existence. Dealing with such interruptions, experts agree, leaves many knowledge workers with the functional equivalent of attention deficit disorder. The remedy usually suggested: Avoid multitasking. Check e-mail only twice a day. Resist the temptation to drop whatever you’re doing to put out a fire somewhere else.

Our research on executive teams suggests that this bias against multitasking may be misguided. In fact, executives who doggedly plow through each task until it’s finished may be doing their companies a disservice. Under some circumstances, top management teams perform better when they accept—even relish—interruptions.

Drawing on data about CEOs and other executives of nearly 200 new technology ventures listed on the London Stock Exchange, we measured top management teams’ polychronicity—their tendency to multitask—and then looked at their firms’ returns. As a result, they were much less apt than the other teams to bog down: They could make strategic decisions faster, placing less emphasis on analyzing large quantities of data. Their expedited decision-making process, we believe, boosted their companies’ performance.

Some Managers Juggle Well, Some Don’t

A third of the executive teams surveyed displayed a preference for interruptions. About half as many preferred to focus deeply. The quotes below are from our study.

**HIGHLY POLYCHRONIC**

"We multitask all the time, not simply because we can—because we want to."

"This team prides itself on being able to oversee several ongoing projects at the same time quite easily…We enjoy the variety, that constant switching, the challenge of needing to concentrate harder."

**HIGHLY MONOCHRONIC**

"It doesn’t matter if anyone thinks one project is less revenue-generating than another. Once we’re on it, our absolute priority lies in finishing what we’ve started."

"Hopping from one project to another? Is that really wise? I mean, there is no time to really think things through, right? I believe it would only ruin our concentration and disrupt our thought process."