

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Six Things Highly Productive Leaders Do

By Barbara Taylor

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In today's business world, we have the ability to get a multitude of data continuously. This is perhaps nowhere more prevalent than in actuarial work. Interestingly, this doesn't equate to actuaries feeling more in control. Adversely, this "easy" access to information has added more stress—with employees feeling they have less time and a never-ending list of demands. Our technology has increased the potential for making contact but has decreased overall communication.

One way people try to deal with all the stimuli is to multi-task or go into an auto-pilot mode. Neither of these are effective—and both contribute to wasted time and unnecessary errors. Our brains can actually go into overload. Attention Deficit Trait (ADT) is when there is a brain traffic jam. ADT occurs most often when the tasks require similar types of thinking. Symptoms of ADT are:

- Distractibility
- Impatience
- Hard time setting priorities
- Making poor decisions
- Inner frenzy
- Trouble staying organized
- Difficulty managing time

Multi-tasking is actually a myth, but it is so well accepted in today's world that people think they should strive to multi-task as often as possible. When you try to do two things at once, you either can't or you won't do either well.

There is a Russian proverb, "If you chase two rabbits, you will not catch either one." Success actually comes when we do a few things well and really focus. It's narrowing the huge list of things you *could* do and instead dealing with the things you *should* do. Instead of trying to spread your attention, the secret is actually the opposite—to determine what the most important priorities are and then complete these with the utmost attention.



Below are six areas that can allow you to take more control of your work life—and they look deceptively easy. They are not. They are, in fact, the beginning steps to make you more effective and successful.

1. **Stop multi-tasking!** No, seriously, stop. Switching from task to task quickly does not work. Successful multi-tasking is a myth. Studies¹ show that a person who is interrupted takes 50 percent longer to accomplish the task. Additionally, your errors can increase by 50 percent.
2. **Schedule your email.** This is harder than it seems, especially in today's world where commercials tout getting data milliseconds before anyone else. However, if you want to be more effective, don't let the data rule you! Pick two or three times during the day when you are going to use your email.
3. **Work on your own agenda.** Don't let other people's agendas set your day. When most people get to their desks, they go right to their emails and get caught. Yes, you will end up answering all the emails in your inbox, but will accomplish nothing! Instead, first thing when you arrive in the office, write down the one to three priorities you need to focus on that day and stick to them as best you can. (If

you're really good at this tip, you will have already identified your priorities before you left the office the day before.)

4. **Be militant about eliminating distractions.** If you are a manager, let your people know that there will be blocked-out times during the week when you are not to be disturbed. If you hear the email, IM or text sirens calling you, put them in sleep mode or, if needed, go to a quiet area so you can focus on completing one task.
5. **Use the phone!** Email and texting aren't meant for *conversations*. Don't reply more than twice to an email. Pick up the phone (or go to their office if on-site) instead and connect with the person more directly.
6. **Work in 60- to 90-minute intervals.** Our brains (and bodies) are not programmed for high-focus or attention marathons. Our brains use up more glucose than our other bodily activities. Typically, we will have used most of it after 60 to 90 minutes. That's why we feel so burned out after super-long meetings. So, make yourself take multiple

breaks throughout the day. Get up, go for a short walk, have a snack, do something completely different to recharge.

Don't try to immediately implement all six at once. You can become overwhelmed and end up going right back to your original behaviors. Sequence them. Identify one or two tips you want to focus on first. Get good at these and then slowly add the remaining tips. You will be amazed how much more productive, effective and successful you will become. ■



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ENDNOTE

- 1 Source: Rogers, R.D., & Monsell, S. 1995. Depth of Processing and the Retention of Words in Episodic Memory. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 124(2): 207-231.

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