

## THE LEADERSHIP DIMENSION

# Multi-Tasking — Or Is It?

By Douglas B. Richardson



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**T**o many law firm boomers who find themselves getting older and slower, one dimension of the much discussed inter-generational issue is particularly vexing: the claim of the successor generation that they think faster, work faster, cover more ground, and cope better with ambiguity and distraction — while producing results that rival the quality of their elders.

“Multi-tasking” has become such a common phrase in the lexicon of Gen Y (and of Gen Xers with a lot of stamina) that it has come to be taken as a given. Somehow, the argument goes, the exponential increase in the speed of our computer circuit boards and the technologies they support has created an astonishing evolutionary leap, resulting in a generation whose speed of perception, cognition, processing and response are markedly faster than prior generations. And we certainly seem to see evidence of these new high-speed capabilities. When I was in film school in the mid-70s, we were taught that to be apprehended meaningfully by the human mind, a “cut” had to be 3-5 seconds long. These days, you could kill scores of dinosaurs in that time (go see the movie King Kong with a stopwatch). In today’s TV ads, movies and television fare, we see numerous cuts in a single second. To the boomers, it’s a blur. Yet our youth seem to have no problem understanding the mile-a-minute lyrics in hip-hop. Our entire culture now operates in what ADD-guru Edward Hallowell, MD calls “the F-state” because so many of its descriptors begin with “F:” frantic, frenzied, fragmented, frazzled, and so on.

The younger generation just now entering the world of work — including law firms and legal departments — claims to be thriving on all this stimulation. “For them,” Hallowell says, “the F-state is fun. While no one needs to check email every 10 minutes, make scores of phone calls every day, and channel surf during

all conversations, these habits develop because they make people feel charged up, as if doing a lot fast puts them on the cutting edge.”

The younger minds, the ones who, says one wag, “will soon put the boomers outside the igloo to freeze” rather than emulate or collaborate with them, claim the ability to multi-task productively. And as you watch your child do homework while instant-messaging, surfing the web, listening to the iPod and watching TV, it certainly appears that they can. They seem able to handle multiple inputs simultaneously, do parallel processing on separate channels, and generate output through different modalities all at once. If this capability exists, surely it must be great as a labor-saver and efficiency engine in a world where the average American now works 160 hours per year more than he or she did in 1960. If this capability exists, does it not follow that in law firms and legal departments young multi-taskers can be assigned more tasks in more categories and achieve more work product? In terms of productivity, are we creating a new order?

As it turns out, probably not. Just as the architects of the dot-boom claimed to have invented a “new economy” only to find that traditional rules of economic gravity still applied, those singing the praises of multi-tasking are learning that they are perpetuating a myth. While many of us can in fact do several mindless things at the same time — walking and chewing gum, for example — research suggests that simultaneous multi-channel cognition is rare and difficult. In fact, much multi-tasking isn’t multi-tasking at all — it’s toggling. That is, the person is switching rapidly between mental channels — disengaging focus, re-focusing, and then disengaging again — rather than actually performing parallel mental processing.

And here’s the rub: new research suggests that while many people toggle fast, few people

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**Multi-Tasking...** *continued from page 3*

toggle well — at least not for long. For lawyers, as for others, toggling can create the mental sensation that one is covering a lot of ground, but this method of time-travel sacrifices those characteristics that most affect the quality of legal judgment and legal work-product: careful analysis, thoughtful exploration, attention to detail, appreciation of subtlety and nuance, reflective word choice, clarity of expression.

We at Altman Weil are hearing more and more complaints that associates “don’t think through the issues,” “can’t write,” are producing “superficial analysis,” or are turning out careless copy and generally inferior work product. In our view, these are all secondary symptoms of what Hallowell calls “frazzing” — his word for ineffective multi-tasking.

In fact, there is no reason to think

that young lawyers are any less intelligent or diligent than their predecessors. But effective management of their time and efforts should include training in how to slow their mental channel-surfing and strong suggestions that they avoid random toggling and change mental focus only when a task reaches a closure or logical transition point. “Give one task your full attention,” Hallowell says, “and you will do it better...[In acquiring new skills] the only way a human can multi-task effectively is to practice one action so thoroughly that it becomes automatic, thus freeing up neurons to attend to other matters.”

Some work-site policies may help enforce mental discipline. Many employers already ban discretionary use of computers — no surfing, IMing, personal messages or gaming on company hardware during lunch.

We also recommend discouraging the use of iPods and earbuds (which have the additional disadvantage of tending to tune out environmental input and discourage conversations with colleagues) while working. Conversely, we urge firms to encourage any activity that increases social interaction and face-to-face human communication. We also recommend associate development training that encourages practice in pre-planning time allocation among competing priorities and breaking work activity into completion modules — that is, logical times to stop, take a breath, take a break, and reset the tapes before turning to another task. ♦

**Douglas B. Richardson, JD, MA, CMC**, is an adjunct consultant with Altman Weil, Inc. He can be reached at [info@altmanweil.com](mailto:info@altmanweil.com).