

# Multitasking

(Published in Barbados Today, 23 August, 2013)

In this fast pace moving world, much emphasis is placed on getting much done and / or accomplished in the shortest possible time. In the workplace, bosses place excessive demands on employees as they pressure them to meet timelines and targets. The expectations are sometimes unrealistic, given that the employees neither have the equipment or other resources required to complete the task. What makes it more challenging is the fact that the employer is fully conscious that the human resources needed to meet the demand is woefully short, and further, that the required skills and competencies are lacking.

Multitasking is described as the ability to execute more than one task at the same time. It is a presumption that most persons have the ability to multitask. Those who have the ability to multitask are to be credited for this skill. Whereas there is a place for multitasking in the workplace, it is unwise to think that such a practice can be engaged and approved in all work environments. There is merit in the argument that multitasking can contribute to the making of mistakes. In some instances a mistake can be corrected, but at the same time, it may not be possible to erase the damage done.

One example of such can be placed within an office setting, where an individual is carrying on a conversation on the telephone while preparing to send an email. Inadvertently the email is sent to a party to whom it was not intended, but whose name was included in a group of names. Though an e-mail is subsequently sent to state that the mail was not intended for the receiver, there is no way that it can be recalled. The damage has

already been done. In a factory setting, the consequences of a mistake through a lapse in concentration in trying to do more than one thing at a time, can be fatal, or lead to serious injury or to the loss of property.

One of the common practices that is evident all over the world is the filling of vehicles with petrol in service stations by attendants. These attendants can be seen attending to two vehicles at the same time. In the process, they are receiving payments, including going off to the credit /debit card machine, and are also engaging in the writing of receipts. There is immense concentration required in executing these separate tasks. These individuals are prone to make mistakes especially when the pressure is on them, due to a pile up of vehicles waiting for service.

Using the service attending experience to guide our thinking in reviewing the pitfalls of multitasking, it certainly points to a slowing down in operations. This puts to rest the notion that it helps to save time. As the process slows, it is more than likely that both productivity and efficiency will be victims. Researchers suggest that switching between tasks can result in approximately twenty to forty percent loss in productivity, dependent on the task that the individual is required to do. The contention is that errors are induced especially where the activities in which an individual is engaged, involve a level of critical thinking.

In making a case for multitasking where upon it can be argued that more than one thing at a time can increase efficiency, productivity, free up more time, it is not to be ignored that workers can be placed under severe stress, as they become overwhelmed with the pressures placed upon them. It is therefore not advisable for workers who are engaged in technical tasks to engage in the practice of multitasking.

The concern today remains with how employers tend to use the notion of multitasking as a means to shed the number of employees in their establishment, or to reduce their hours of work. They advanced the notion that multitasking improves the productivity and efficiency of all employees. If multitasking is to be an option for the employer, it has to be carefully weighed, and not applied based on an expectation and perception. Employers need to give consideration to the nature and demands of the business, and to the level of human resource that is required to enable the business to achieve its goals and targets.