



Multi-tasking vs. Overlapping The difference is the number of goals



By Jeffrie Story
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Did you know that multi-tasking came from science fiction? And that every day your multi-tasking takes a future into the present?

Think of multi-tasking as a wondrous time machine, except this machine moves *tasks* – not people - from a future chunk of time into the present so that we can perform multiple tasks at the same time. Now put a caveat on the definition: all the transported tasks contribute to **one single goal**, such as effectively handling a customer call.

When I was a call center leader, we tested job applicants on how well they could multi-task. It was critical to success and profitability. If the applicants couldn't talk to customers, manipulate a ridiculously complex computer system, take notes, up-sell, figure prices, and input orders simultaneously, we wouldn't hire them.

It makes sense. Multi-tasking saves time for the customer on the line and provides better service. Without it, you could never have enough headcount for call requirements – or your call center would fill your entire building and eat all the profits.

I have personally concluded, however, that our definition of multi-tasking has erupted over its useful boundaries into unproductive, costly ooze – whether for a sales rep or a manager. Why? Because we have confused it with what I call *overlapping*. Overlapping is the same type of time machine, but the tasks serve **multiple goals**.

Think of the last time you were in a meeting while participants had their heads down, presumably participating while they answered emails from their blackberries.

Multi-tasking is good.

Overlapping is not so good. It bounces our focus from one goal to another, and we can lose effectiveness or productivity in both.

There are times, however, when overlapping can serve us, such as reading a book while waiting for a flight. We're utilizing the same time to accomplish two goals, but neither is compromised – unless we get so absorbed in the book that we miss our flight.

The challenge is to balance two things at all times: the goal, and effective use of time. There are many ways to save time by multi-tasking, but a careless use of overlapping could sneak in to sabotage our success. So take control where you can!

Now let's take a quiz. In the following scenarios, determine whether you believe the time-transported tasks are: (A) good, (B) bad, or (C) dependent on the situation.

1. You're with a customer who has a service problem. Simultaneously you are listening, taking notes, thinking of solutions, demonstrating understanding, and apologizing.
2. While your boss is on the phone with you, you take advantage of the time to read incoming emails.
3. You have an open-door policy and encourage employees to interrupt at any point, demonstrating you are always willing to help.
4. You set your computer to check for email every five minutes, buzzing you each time an email arrives. You immediately stop to read each one.
5. Your reps are frantically working on a highly important deadline. Simultaneously you raise their quotas and introduce a new compensation plan.
6. You're in yet another meeting with your peers and you take advantage of the time by making your grocery list or beginning what's sure to be a best-selling novel.

If you have difficulty with any answers in the quiz, just email me. I answer all email within 35 seconds.

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