



The evils of multitasking

In library land, we seem to admire the ability to juggle many tasks at once. For example, most library workers can answer the phone, check out a book, and unjam the photo copier all at once! However, in recent months, there have been several studies suggesting that focusing on one activity at a time is actually more productive, less stressful, and better for your health and safety. The

concept is that it is not only difficult to perform two or more tasks successfully at the same time, but it is actually counterproductive.

At this time of year, as we all try to do more and more things in less and less time, we are more susceptible to errors which can be, in some instances, disastrous. In the multitasking world, we often trade off accuracy for speed. Many case studies have concluded that talking on a cell phone is a significant contributor to motor vehicle accidents, and a 2004 U.S. study found that drivers using a cell phone are more impaired in their decision making than an intoxicated driver!

The long-term effects of multitasking also can be bad for your health by overloading your brain with conflicting messages and unnecessary stress. For example, at my desk, I flit back and forth between emails, documents, the phone, and folks standing at the door. These interruptions require constant juggling and task switching. In a study of Microsoft employees, each major interruption required them to take, on average, 12 minutes to refocus on a challenging mental task. Another study found that distractions and task changing resulted in a temporary 10 point decline in IQ scores.

For a committed multitasker like me, this was a rude shock! I can't do everything all at the same time!

So, as I start thinking about New Year's resolutions, I am trying to recognize my limitations and reduce my potential for errors and excessive stress. I likely will still make dinner and watch the Food Channel at the same time, but maybe I'll stop texting and simply enjoy walking the dogs!

Kitty Pope
kpope@alliancelibrarysystem.com

#44 December 2009