Multitasking and Meetings: How to Be More Effective

Most multitaskers perform badly in a variety of tasks. They don’t focus as well as non-multitaskers, and are more distractible.

Business is changing faster than perhaps any other time in recent history. The shifting economy is a prime driver, but so is technology – the rapidly evolving factor in the change sweeping most companies.

Technology innovations are changing what our companies produce and how we get our products/services to market. But technology is also changing how we do what we do.

Consider meetings, for instance, and how in-person meetings are fast being replaced by meetings brought to you by technology – the so-called virtual meetings, online meetings and the like.

The facts speak for themselves: Forbes recently released a survey that showed how companies increasingly rely on teleconferences, videoconferences and Web conferencing. More than half of the 760 executives surveyed (58%) said they are now traveling less frequently for meetings than just one year ago. The economic and productivity benefits are strongly cited as the reasons why.

More so than with in-person meetings, the challenges for virtual meetings are daunting. Interaction Associates recently surveyed 200 business leaders and the two most significant issues were: getting everyone engaged and participating; and multitasking during meetings which means not paying close attention.

Multitasking: Here To Stay

While I’m at it, perhaps a few more statistics are worth looking at briefly. A 2004 survey by Raindance Communications Inc., sheds interesting light on the multitasking issue – especially because the data is so eye-opening . . . and yet it’s five years old. One can only imagine how startling the numbers would be today, with the evolution of pocket devices, the Web, and so on.

Consider the statistics from 2004:

- 90% of people on conference calls said they multi-task
- 70% reported doing other, unrelated work
- 50% reported doing email or texting
- 35% said they were eating
35% said they muted the meeting line to conduct side conversations

25% are surfing the web

The eating may not be so bad, but it’s alarming that 50 to 70% of meeting participants report seriously doing other things during the meeting. Which begs the question: Just who is listening eagerly and participating, contributing and taking on shared responsibility for our success?

**What’s the harm in multitasking?**

Many people would say that multitasking makes them more effective, not less. And they contend that this is just “how it is today” - i.e., we can listen, meet and multitask at the same time. No problem.

But data from an [August, 2009 Stanford University study](http://www.stanford.edu) strongly contradicts this notion.

The study indicates that, really, most multitaskers perform badly in a variety of tasks. They don’t focus as well as non-multitaskers, and are more distractible. It seems, as a rule, people who constantly multi-task are even weaker at shifting from one task to another and at organizing information! The study went on to say “We kept looking for multitaskers’ advantages in this study. But we kept finding only disadvantages. We thought multitaskers were very much in control of information. It turns out they were just getting it all confused.”

Wow. It is a wonder that we get anything at all accomplished in our meetings, considering this data; much less produce commitment among the team members and stellar results.

So, what can be done? How can we engineer our meetings in a way that gets everyone to contribute—even those who specialize in multitasking? How can we keep people in the game in a productive way and get the results we’re after, engaging all the brains in the virtual room?

**Methods to Address Multitasking**

At Interaction Associates, we’ve been studying the way people meet for more than 40 years, and we’ve got a few tips, even for those chronic multitaskers among us.

If you’re caught up trying to manage the multitaskers, consider these leading practices:

1. **Right People:** Invite the right people to the meeting, and be sure everyone knows why they are there and what is expected of them. There is nothing that will turn off a meeting participant faster than not having the answer to “What’s in it for me?” If participants are unsure how the material relates to them, the likelihood is they will just open their emails in a new window and multi-task away. If their role is just “to listen,” maybe you should record the meeting and let them listen at their convenience.
2. **Clear Agendas:** Have clear agendas (consider very visual ones) with shared roles. An agenda should include specific desired outcomes from each piece of content. “Discuss tasks for the product roll-out” isn’t specific enough. Think to yourself, “How will we know when it’s completed?” Then you might rephrase that item as, “A list of tasks for the roll-out.” Be sure to consider how you want to engage people throughout the meeting, and have specific ways to do that, such as calling on them or using a chat function.

3. **Cue Clearly:** Use auditory cues for focusing people on the work at hand. Try calling on people by name, or saying, “Let’s move to the folks in the Chicago office,” to help keep people on track and knowing they will be involved. You can return to the agenda at any time to refocus the group.

4. **Use Technology:** Make full use of the technology to which you have access. In a low-tech environment, you can put pictures of the participants in the meeting up on a wall, for example. In higher tech settings, use the polling functions and chat rooms for specific purposes. With all of the collaborative processes now available, you can do some amazing things in the online meeting room. At the simplest level, when you are trying to get agreements, use the hand-raising functions often found on virtual meeting sites.

5. **Make It Visual:** Visuals are engaging. Think in pictures. Use humor. You may need more slides than in a “live” presentation, not fewer. Use a lot less text, and never just run the text of what you are saying across the screen – studies have shown participants actually retain LESS information that way. Stop the endless bullets.

For all of us, finding the best ways of bringing people together—to get business done—will continue to be a major challenge. For so many of our multitaskers (uhm, that’s most of us), the challenges are significant. Try these tips to help all of us regain our focus and help the group achieve success in the dimensions of results, process and relationship in the virtual world.

Always remember that in any virtual meeting, you are, in fact, competing for the mindshare of your virtual meeting participants. Make sure they know what’s in it for them and then structure the meeting and the interactions so that you can compete well for their attention and participation. And, of course, work to continuously improve—commit yourself to leading and participating with others in smart and effective meetings in cyberspace.

---