

Multitasking vs. Continuous Partial Attention – Which of these two forms of time management should you look for in an employee?

A non-representative scan of several leading job boards reveals a fact that is hardly surprising: all employers want their employees to multi-task. It seems as though multi-tasking is a job requirement for just about every knowledge worker regardless of industry or position. One might think that if every employer seeks a multi-tasker, it must be an important skill to have. The question is, if an effective multi-tasker sat in front of you, would you know it?

How can an employer differentiate between a candidate with effective multi-tasking skills and a candidate who suffers from “continuous partial attention”? How can one measure effective multitasking? To address these questions, let’s examine the differences between true multitasking and continuous partial attention.

It was once believed that humans should be able to concentrate on many things at the same time. At the workplace and beyond, we wanted to believe that we could juggle multiple priorities, projects, and deadlines. In fact, most of us do it every day. Parents talk on the phone while watching TV, prepare dinner, and babysit three kids all at the same time. Drivers drive, listen to the radio, eat, talk on the phone, and groom themselves while simultaneously keeping an eye out for police cruisers. The notion of getting many things done at the same time seemed very compelling to employers. After all, this is a great way for them to get maximum ROI from their human capital.

The problem is, juggling multiple tasks is a lot more complex than we think. While much research still needs to be done, several studies, most notably the one conducted by Rubinstein, Meyer, and Evans (2001) indicated that when people take on more than one task at a time, they tend to become less efficient, particularly when it involves difficult or unfamiliar tasks. Unlike a computer, we can only perform one complex computation at a time, regardless of how fast we think our processor (brain) works. Any other concurrent tasks we perform are based on automatic processes; actions that do not require conscious thought and thus do not require our attention. That’s why, while maneuvering through traffic may seem almost instinctive during our morning drive, it becomes much more difficult when trying to hold up a conversation at the same time – hence, the numerous cases of road accidents involving cell phone users.

Continuous Partial Attention was a term coined by Linda Stone in 1998, describing a state of being whereby a person is focused on one task, but his or her attention is scattered, scanning incoming data for opportunities to take on something better or more important. Imagine having ten windows open on your browser, each devoted to different projects. As you’re working on one project, you discover that you can’t move forward until a colleague finishes his part of a report, so you switch to another as you fire off a message to said colleague on the status of his part. As you switch to another



pending project in the meantime, an important potential client calls about a proposal you are very interested in suggesting to him or her. So you shift to the SPECS you prepared for this conversation, flipping through your multiple windows to find it. By the time you hang up the phone and have begun writing up a contract for your now newly acquired client, your colleague gets back to you on your original project and indicates that all systems are go. So you immediately shift gears because you don't want to pass up the opportunity to complete this pending project. This, in essence, is Continuous Partial Attention. And you can assume that many of your employees suffer from it, along with most job candidates you will encounter.

So how does this differ from multitasking?

A multi-tasker is someone with effective time management skills. Someone who is able to do one task at a time yet switch to a second task immediately when the first one is done. However, what the difference really comes down to is the motivation behind the desire to juggle multiple tasks. According to Linda Stone, while the individual who engages in Continuous Partial Attention is motivated by the desire not to miss golden opportunities, multi-taskers are motivated by the desire to be industrious and efficient. The question now is, if effective multitasking is largely due effective to time management skills, how does one measure it? This is where Psychtests can help. Rather than scanning multiple CVs for the words "effective multi-tasker", contact us and we will provide you with tool to assess this widely sought-after yet often misunderstood skill.