

How to Multitask the Taco Bell Way

Written by Nick Sanders
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Multitasking is the ability to juggle multiple projects and multiple demands—all at the same time. The concept comes to us from the information technology field, where multitasking is defined as “the simultaneous execution of more than one program or task by a single computer processor.” Over time, the notion of multitasking migrated from the realm of hardware and software into the field of business, where humans are asked to perform more than one task or activity at the same time. Multitasking is now considered to be a fundamental requirement for many positions, including those in management.

The topic of multitasking frequently arises in both job descriptions and in interview questions. A quick LinkedIn search recently found a job description for a Senior R&D Manager. In that description was the following: “This is a highly collaborative environment where willingness and ability to communicate and work flexibly is essential. Ability to multitask in technical and managerial responsibilities is desired.” Another position description for an “Office Manager and Accounting Coordinator” at an engineering firm stated that the job required “Attention to detail and good organizational skills” and “Ability to multitask while keeping track of all on-going activities”. I could list many other similar examples. A Google search on the phrase “multitasking interview questions” reveals 144,000 results regarding how to handle interview questions on that topic, including model answers to give to the interviewers. It is thus apparent that the ability to multitask is a sought-after skill, and those who can demonstrate it should expect better jobs and better pay.

The problem with the notion that multitasking is a skill or ability that can distinguish one in the workplace is that *there is really no such thing*.

Multitasking is not a skill that can be learned nor is it a trait that can be demonstrated.

It’s a chimera, an imaginary construct. Like a creature from mythology, it is a concept that has been around for a while, but there is no evidence that it actually exists. To the contrary, the evidence points to it being a fictional creation.

Even in computing, processors don’t really “multitask” and, instead, the CPU actively executes instructions only for one task at a time. The multitasking—such as it is—lies in the sequencing of the processes. A Wikipedia article states “New tasks start and interrupt already started ones before they have reached completion, instead of executing the tasks sequentially so each

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started task needs to reach its end before a new one is started. As a result, a computer executes segments of multiple tasks in an interleaved manner, while the tasks share common processing resources such as CPUs and main memory.” Thus, for computers, multitasking is all about prioritization and sequencing.

Similarly, multitasking for humans isn’t really multitasking at all. In theory, we should be able to answer a phone while typing an email and surfing the internet; however, in reality multitasking is really a series of single tasks performed according to a prioritization, an innate trade analysis between task and outcome. We speak on the phone and pause the typing. We hit enter on the keyboard and type a bit of the email while the website is loading. Those events happen singly and they do not all happen at once. Because that’s how humans operate.

More importantly, attempts to truly multitask almost inevitably result in suboptimal outcomes. For example, Junco and Cotton (2010) found that “that using Facebook and text messaging while studying were negatively related to student grades.” Another study (Strayer, Drews, et al, 2006) found that drivers talking on cell phones were more involved in rear-end collisions and sped up more slowly than drivers who were actually intoxicated. Attempts to multitask have been found to result in wasted time (stemming from something called “context switching”). Attempts to multitask have been linked to quality escapes and defects (stemming from an inability to pay sufficient attention to detail). Matt Richtel, writing in the New York Times (2008) estimated that US businesses lost \$650 billion annually from the wasted time associated with employee multitasking.

Still, some version of multitasking is real, at least in terms of information analysis. Johnson (2005) asserted that *information scanning* to pick out relevant details, without deep-diving into those details, is a valuable skill. He wrote that this type of multitasking “usually involves skimming the surface of the incoming data, picking out the relevant details, and moving on to the next stream. You’re paying attention, but only partially. That lets you cast a wider net, but it also runs the risk of keeping you from really studying the fish.” There is value in deciding which messages out of many deserve attention, and which do not. But that’s not multitasking in the sense of reading multiple inputs at the same time; it’s simply *prioritizing inputs* based on a preliminary assessment of potential value.

I learned about multitasking back at Taco Bell #47.

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If you know anything about Taco Bell, you know that it's a vast global fast food restaurant chain. It has more than 6,500 restaurants. So when I say that I worked at Taco Bell #47, you know that I'm talking about a long time ago. I was a teenager when my experience at Taco Bell #47 taught me how to multitask. I should be clear that I don't know if this approach is still taught at restaurants. I suspect not; I'm pretty sure it's not written down in any Taco Bell manual, and I couldn't find any references to it on the Internet. I suspect I learned it because I was lucky enough to be surrounded by knowledgeable and experienced team members who were willing to share their "tribal knowledge" with me.

And now I'm going to share with you how to multitask, the way I was taught at Taco Bell #47.

If you've ever worked in a fast food restaurant you have experienced the situation known as a "rush". Whether it's a lunch rush or dinner rush, it's the same thing: the restaurant fills with lines of *hungry* and *impatient* people, anxious to get their food and gobble it down. They want to be served and they want to be served *right now*. Meanwhile, the drive-thru line wraps around the building and, if it doesn't move fast enough, tempers start to flare. ⁱ Fast-food restaurants generate most of their daily sales during the rushes but for the staff it's a stress-filled time.

The goal, of course, is to move as many people through the lines as quickly as possible.

In order to move the people through the lines, the team has to work as one. The person on the register has to take the order quickly, ring it up, and take the money and deliver the change. That starts the clock for the order, and from then on the rest of the team needs to prepare the food, wrap it and serve it (either bag or tray), get the drinks, and get the food to the customer—all while the customer looks on with impatience. (And hunger.) And speed of service isn't the only important metric; the accuracy of the order matters as well. And not only that, but the food has to meet quality standards. So: speed, accuracy, and quality drive the customer experience.

During the rushes any problem impacts these areas and slows down customer queuing. If the food prep team falls behind, the dining room starts to fill with unhappy customers waiting for their orders. If an order is taken (or prepared or served) inaccurately, it has to be redone, which impacts the team's workflow—and leads to a very unhappy customer, especially if the customer discovered the inaccurate order after leaving the dining room. If the food quality isn't

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where it needs to be, the customer expects it to be remade and remade correctly. Any little problem becomes magnified during the rushes and reduces sales while at the same time creating a negative customer impression.

Where does multitasking fit in to this order-in-the-midst-of-chaos? The fact is that not all customers are created equal. There are customers who know what they want and there are customers who have questions and there are customers who can't make up their minds. There are customers who've never eaten Mexican food before.ⁱⁱ There are customers who are ordering for groups and for families, and there are customers who are ordering just for themselves. They all expect the same level of service, as defined by speed, accuracy, and quality. But they have different needs and they need to be handled in different ways.

At Taco Bell #47 I was introduced to the concept of the "single item order". The single item order is exactly what you'd think it would be: somebody is ordering a single taco or a single burrito or a single drink. That's all they want and no amount of up-selling is going to change their mind. Back in the day, a single taco or a single burrito cost less than a dollar; the restaurant was not going to make much in sales (or margin) from that order. I learned that it was best to move that customer on their way as quickly as possible, so as to make room for the next customer, who might order a number of items and maybe a couple of drinks.ⁱⁱⁱ

Accordingly, we developed special handing for the single item order customer. Any single item order went immediately to the front of the food preparation queue. It got immediate priority. The person on the cash register would yell out "single item" and what it was, and the food prep line would stop and pivot and make that single item and stuff it and bag it and get it to the customer just as quickly as possible. And then the team would go back to what it was doing.

That is multi-tasking the Taco Bell way. Get the single item order out fast to make room for the bigger, more profitable orders.

That's not really a revolutionary concept, I grant you. The business world has similar concepts, such as "low-hanging fruit" and "quick wins". In any given long-duration project, progress can be demonstrated best by completing a few quick milestones. It takes the pressure off and provides fodder for the status meetings. It makes management smile.

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The key thing is the *prioritization of the tasking*. At Taco Bell #47 I learned that the team has to stop what they are doing, pivot, and then make the single item order the focus of all efforts. Get it done and get it out. Then pivot back and resume normal operations. That's harder to do than it sounds, and it tends to run counter to some long-term project management approaches, which advocate devoting a *portion* of the team effort to scoring quick wins while concurrently moving forward on the project's critical path.

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(Filey, 2010) The Taco Bell multitasking philosophy says the entire team should focus on the quick wins to clear the road for the entire team to focus and to work the critical path as one, unhindered and without distraction.

Importantly, the Taco Bell multitasking approach only works because the single item orders are unique unto themselves. They have no predecessor events and no antecedent events. They can be worked, worked quickly, and then forgotten. If that wasn't the case, the Taco Bell multitasking philosophy might not be the right approach to accomplishing the restaurant's objectives and meeting the success criteria I listed above.

Savvy readers will have already realized that the Taco Bell approach to multitasking isn't really multitasking. It's very much akin to how computers multitask: it's all about prioritization and sequencing. The funny thing is, I learned how to multitask the Taco Bell way about the same time as the Apple II home computer was being released. Nobody who worked at Taco Bell #47 had one. So it's a mystery as to how this important aspect of computer operating system management found its way to the employees of a small fast-food restaurant in Southern California.

Nonetheless, remembering how we handled single item orders at Taco Bell #47 has helped me throughout my career, in both managing multiple tasks and in managing people. I remain grateful for my experience and for my co-workers who took the time to teach me the concepts.

i Full disclosure: Taco Bell #47 didn't have a drive-thru window, which is probably one of the primary reasons it no longer exists. Ditto Taco Bell #1068, where I also worked.

ii Yes, I'm calling Taco Bell Mexican food. When I worked there the cheese came in blocks and the beans were cooked daily in big pressure cookers. It was a real Mexican restaurant, albeit a SoCal gringo fast-food version.

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iii□ We liked it when customers ordered iced tea. Iced tea was the big money-maker. Make a big pot in the morning and serve it all day over ice. Charge the same as a sugar-based fountain drink, but without the costs. Profit!

iv□ The Taco Bell multitasking approach is probably closer to “agile” project management, which consists of short-term delivery cycles, also known as “sprints”. But the Taco Bell approach saves the sprints only for single item orders.