

Multitasking is a Myth

Does that headline shock you? Multitasking has become something of a heroic word in our vocabulary, but multitasking, as most people understand it, is deceptively counterproductive. It's tremendously costly and hurts us every time we attempt to engage in it.

When most people refer to multitasking, they mean simultaneously performing two or more things that require mental effort and attention. Examples would be spending time with family while we're researching stocks online or pretending to listen to an employee while we are crunching the numbers.

What most people refer to as multitasking, I refer to as *switchtasking*. Why? Because we really cannot do two things at the same time—we are only one person with only one brain. Neurologically speaking, it has been proven to be impossible. What we are really doing is switching back and forth between two tasks rapidly, typing here, paying attention there, checking our “crackberry” here, answering voice mail there, back and forth, back and forth at a high rate. Keep this up over a long time and you have deeply ingrained habits that cause stress and anxiety and dropped responsibilities and a myriad of productivity and focus problems. It's little wonder so many people complain of increasingly short attention spans!

When we speak of multitasking, what we really mean is that we are *switchtasking*: switching rapidly between one task and another. Yet, each time we switch, no matter how quickly that switch takes place in our mind, there is a cost associated with it. It's an economic term called switching cost—and the switching cost is high.

May I offer the following “beginning steps” to help slow down the switchtasking in your life?

- **Take control over technology.** Your cell phone ringer (even on vibrate) doesn't need to be on all the time; neither does e-mail notification on your computer. Become master over the nagging beeps and buzzes by creating some silence.
- **Schedule what you can schedule.** Set regular times in the day and week to check your voice mail and e-mail. Let others know that you will be using that schedule so they know when to expect a reply.
- **Focus on the person.** When you switchtask when dealing with a computer, you simply lose efficiency. But if you switchtask on a human being, you additionally damage a relationship. Be present, listen carefully, and make sure everything has been taken care of before moving on. ▼

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Hazard vs. Risk

Many environmental activist groups want the government to regulate Refined Tar Sealer (RTS) on the basis of hazard rather than risk. In the world of regulation, the word “hazard” has a specific meaning, referring to an inherent property of a substance that, in certain circumstances, can be dangerous. Water, for example, is a drowning hazard, can make you sick if ingested in excess, and can be dangerous when frozen.

In presentations, writings and web sites, USGS staff scientists and their followers never fail to point out hazard listings of coal tar without mentioning the circumstance in which the hazard may be associated with an actual risk that needs to be managed – that is, high-temperature industrial settings.

Regulation of chemicals in the U.S. is comprehensive with dozens of overlapping programs at the federal level alone. Those that most visibly impact RTS include OSHA's HazComm which requires disclosure of hazards via MSDS. Refined tar- and asphalt-based emulsions are both mixtures of ingredients, which means the ingredients are individually regulated by EPA via the Toxic Substances Control Act. EPA also administers the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) which regulates waste materials from cradle to grave. RCRA exempts coke oven byproduct materials that are recycled to the “tar recovery process as a feedstock to produce coal tar, or mixed with coal tar prior to the tar's sale or refining” from hazardous waste regulation because refined coal tar does not exhibit any of the toxicity characteristics used by RCRA to identify hazardous wastes.

Coal tars also were produced during the now-defunct process of manufacturing gas from coal. Hundreds of former gas plants (MGP) around the country are listed as “hazardous waste sites,” not because of the coal tar, but because of substances mixed in with the coal tar that *do* have toxicity characteristics. EPA and the courts have issued opinions that, unless a material displays toxicity characteristics because other substances are present, “MGP remediation wastes [coal tar] are unlikely to be RCRA hazardous waste under the federal program,” so would not be required to meet RCRA Land Disposal Restriction requirements.

RT-12 has been tested and does not meet the RCRA hazardous waste criteria. RTS also passes EPA's toxicity characteristic test, indicating that RTS does not meet the criteria to be a hazardous waste and disposal in nonhazardous-waste landfills is appropriate. Coal tar and fractional distillates of coal tar are specifically designated “Generally Recognized as Safe and Effective” in FDA regulations for use in over-the-counter skin medications. FDA's Cosmetic Ingredient Review process has, however, not approved use of coal tar in cosmetics, so today you won't find the coal tar eye liner that was used in the distant past.

So even if RTS were an important source of PAHs in storm water retention pond sediments – which science has shown to be incorrect in Minnesota – the MN Pollution Control Agency's claim that the sediment must be disposed in hazardous waste landfills because of the use of RTS would not be the case if Minnesota were to follow federal standards. ▼