MODULE 3: SINGLE-TASK STRATEGY

Module Introduction

Do you sometimes feel like you haven't really accomplished anything at the end of the working day? Do you think that you're just jumping from one task to another, but not really finishing anything? Then understanding and learning the concept of single-task strategy will be helpful for you! In this module, we'll explain what single-tasking is and why and how you should do it. We shall also suggest some activities that will help you develop single tasking as a working style.

Our working world has changed rapidly in recent decades.

On the one hand, numerous new communication channels (such as smartphones, social networks, etc.) have been added, and on the other hand, the speed of work has increased.

For many people, multitasking seems to be the solution. Multitasking seems to be the best way to get a lot done in a short time. And we expect that if we do a lot of things at once, we will be incredibly productive, efficient and often even superior to others. Just like the thought: "Take a good look at how much I get done at the same time, while you're occupied only with one task."

However, if we think we are very productive and successful when multitasking, we are actually wrong. In multiple studies, research has looked in the results of "single-tasking" and "multi-tasking" at work, and here is what they have found.

- Multitasking leads to a higher error rate and wasted time.
- When we work on different tasks at the same time, our IQ is dropping to levels as if we have been awake all night.
- Individuals who particularly frequently spend time interacting with different digital media simultaneously (e.g., texting while watching TV) show some brain impairment which impacts their decision making and impulse control.

On the other hand, it is scientifically proven that single tasking:

- is faster,
- produces better results,
- makes people more satisfied.

The reason why multitasking is not effective is because our brain performs well only when we concentrate on one thing.

Here is the definition of single-tasking:

It is the practice of dedicating oneself to a given task and minimizing potential interruptions until the task is completed or a significant period of time has passed. It contains two words:

- Single – meaning only one;
- Task – meaning a piece of work to be done or undertaken.

Single-tasking contrasts with multitasking, which is the ability to divide one's focus among multiple tasks. According to Earl Miller, a professor of neuroscience at MIT, people only think they are multitasking. What they are actually doing is switching rapidly between tasks and there is cognitive stress added with every switch, which accumulates and can eventually lead to fatigue, overload and burnout.

Single-tasking is extremely important when we work with digital technologies, because digital technologies can strongly tempt people to do several things at the same time. In addition, push notifications and social networks may cause constant distractions and interruptions in the work process.

In order to avoid stress and burnout in the digital era, the best thing you can do is to build your personal single-tasking strategy at work and follow it.

It will require consistency and dedication from your side, but the payoff will be worth it.

Follow the activities we have prepared for you to build your single-task strategy.

You can listen to the material [here](#).

Activity 1

Before you start your work today (or tomorrow), prepare a plan with your tasks for the whole day (e. g., by creating a table) and allocate time for each task. Try to monitor and manage the time for each task carefully during the day.

Attention: when writing your task plan, give yourself reasonable time for each task you have to undertake and fulfil today.

Activity 2

Look at the plan you have done yesterday and check whether you were able to follow it and fulfil it.

If yes, CONGRATULATIONS! You did an awesome job!

If not, it is not worth being harsh with yourself or blaming others for it.

Now is the time to be brutally honest with yourself while checking your plan from yesterday and answering the following questions:

1. Did you hear any background noise while working on your tasks: i.e. phone ringing, notification sounds, music, people talking, rain, etc.?
2. Did you stop to work on a planned task, in order to:
   a. check your email;
   b. answer an instant message;
   c. take a phone call;
   d. read news online or look at the social media networks (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc.)?
3. Were you able to stay focused on every task in your plan?
4. Were you able to fulfil your plan and finish successfully all the tasks?

Make a list of the things which you consider as main distractors for your work.

Activity 3

Before you start your work today (or tomorrow), prepare a plan with your tasks and allocate time for each task.

Following your experience in the previous tasks take a decision to avoid the main things that interrupt and distract you from working.

It is good to set aside some "quiet time" during the day for the tasks that require deeper focus. "Quiet time" means that during this time you are not reachable: your email client is closed, also all social media, your phone's sound is switched off and notifications are turned

off. If you need such "Quiet time" be sure to warn your colleagues/boss/family about it and to set an urgent communication method, which they can use if needed.

Activity 4

At first: Reflect shortly: how did the task from yesterday work?

Do you know that we can train our brains to focus and concentrate?

Here is a guided practice that can help you to improve and further strengthen your focus.

Activity 5

Here is another technique for focusing on specific tasks. It is a breathing exercise that can heighten performance and concentration while also being a powerful stress reliever. It's used by everyone from athletes to U.S. Navy SEALs, police officers, and nurses. This technique can be very beneficial to reduce the digital stress. It's also called square breathing, because it consists of 4 steps:

Step 1: Breathe in counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs.
Step 2: Hold your breath for 4 seconds. Try to avoid exhaling for 4 seconds.
Step 3: Slowly exhale through your mouth for 4 seconds.
Step 4: Hold your breath for 4 seconds. Try to avoid inhaling for 4 seconds.
Repeat this exercise as many times as you can. 30 seconds of deep breathing will help you feel more relaxed and in control.
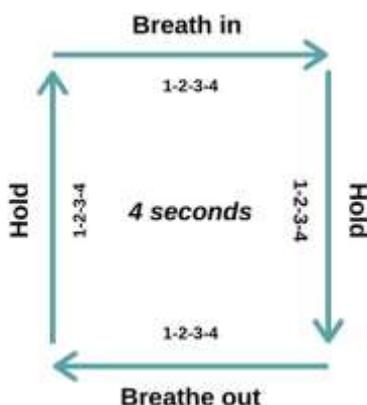
Activity 6

Sometimes no matter how well we have planned our working day, we will face interruptions that we have to accept, i.e. our boss will call and give us a new priority task.

When our plans change, usually we panic or get confused. In such occasions the Meditation for focus or Square breathing techniques can help us go back on track.

And after we are back on track, we should re-prioritize the tasks in our daily plan.

The so-called Eisenhower principle for categorizing tasks can help a lot. Here are the task categories we should use while planning:

• Important and urgent: task must be completed today and worked on carefully

• Important but not urgent: task can be completed on another day

• Urgent, but not important: task can be delegated

• Not urgent, not important: task is dispensable

This principle has a positive effect on well-being and motivation, especially in case of many interruptions.

And if you fear that your prioritization differs from your boss's prioritization, discuss your priorities with them and thus have your prioritization confirmed or adjusted.

Activity 7

It is time to pay attention to the daily plans you create for work tasks and to check: Do you plan time for rest?

If not, just do it now. Employ 30-minute to 2-hour rule: Move at least every thirty minutes, if only briefly, and never stay seated for more than two hours.

When you are single-tasking, it is important to take breaks. Focusing intently takes time and effort, and our attention is a finite resource. Each time you finish a focus session, whether it is 25 minutes or an hour, make sure you take a proper break.

Activity 8

It is important how we start our working day, but it is also important how we end it and what we learn from it in order to do even better the following day.

Here is an exercise that can helps us to be more mindful of our day. It is called "Five-finger exercise". Simply do it at the end of the day.

Go through each finger starting from the thumb and write down your answers to the following questions:

- Thumb: Stands for the typical "like". What was good today?
- Index finger: What did I learn today?
- Middle finger: What was lousy today?
- Ring finger: What strengthened my connection to my colleagues / partners / clients?
- Pinky: What came up short today?

Now go through the questions again and give your answers to the same questions, taking into consideration your use of digital technologies at work today.

Are there any differences in your answers?

If yes, why did you not mention it in your original responses?

Keep in mind that the digital environment has a huge impact on our work and life, and we need to take it into consideration in order to manage properly our activities.

Activity 9

Now you have a set of instruments / techniques for focusing, planning and implementing single-tasking in your daily work! We hope you have fun trying out each one of them!

It's time for the last activity: Create your own single-tasking strategy and follow it on a daily basis.

If you want to continue the journey towards reducing digital stress, choose another module of this programme.