



## The Benefits of Specialized Cleaning & Potential Pitfalls of Multitasking

by Jim Harris, Sr.

“...We are working longer and harder than ever. Some of that is certainly due to the increasing complexity of our society, but some of that may have to do with the inefficiencies of multitasking.” —Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN medical correspondent.

Whenever I am asked why Team Cleaning workers are referred to as specialists, I turn to the medical field for analogy: If you had an ear infection, you would not seek treatment from a podiatrist. And while your first stop for an unidentified ache might be a general practitioner, if the condition persisted, you would go to someone with expertise in the area of discomfort—a specialist. Cleaning should be no different, especially given the increasingly recognized link between sanitation and health.

In cleaning—as in healthcare and any number of other vital industries—obtaining specific, high-quality results requires the focused attention of a well-trained staff. It is this reliance on specialized expertise that, perhaps above all else, separates Team Cleaning from zone, gang, and other more generalized cleaning systems.

### **Meet the Specialists**

Depending on the needs of the facility, a cleaning team can be comprised of one to four or more workers. Below are Team Cleaning’s four basic specialties:

- Light-duty specialty - dust, spot-clean, and empty trash.
- Vacuum specialty - vacuum carpeting, hard floors, upholstery, and other surfaces as necessary; turn out lights; secure completed areas.
- Restroom specialty - clean and sanitize restroom fixtures, surfaces, floors, and drinking fountains; empty restroom trash; refill dispensers.
- Utility specialty - clean lobbies, stairwells, and other flooring and entrance glass; take trash from collection points to disposal area.



Although each specialist's responsibilities include enough variation to prevent the monotony that some experts claim can cause inefficiency, low worker morale, and even injury, the list's brevity makes training, cross-training, and supervision easier while enhancing quality, productivity, and worker accountability. Most important, however, is the limited number of duties that enables workers to focus on the task at hand, which research now shows can play a major role in overall operational performance.

### **Potential Dangers of Multitasking**

Especially since technology began tightening its grip on the business world, much fuss has been made over multitasking—the ability to perform multiple actions, such as using a cell phone while driving, dashing off e-mails while on a conference call, or entering customer numbers into your PDA during a business seminar. Yet an increasing amount of research shows that rather than help workers do more, multitasking can actually jeopardize productivity, quality, safety—even worker morale. Let's look at some of these findings and how they relate to cleaning.

### **Productivity and Labor Costs**

A landmark study published in the American Psychological Society's *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* found that people who multitask are actually less productive than those who focus on one project at a time. More specifically, the research discovered that people actually lose time when they must switch from one task to another.

“Trying to do two or three things at once or in quick succession can take longer overall than doing them one at a time and may leave you with reduced brainpower to perform each task,” writes David Meyer, Ph.D., one of the three researchers who led the studies and whose ongoing research on multitasking as a psychology professor at the University of Michigan continues to be highlighted by the media worldwide. Meyer and his fellow researchers refer to this downtime as the “switch cost,” which, they say, occurs in two distinct stages: goal shifting (I want to do this instead of that) and rule activation (I'm turning off the rules for that task and switching them on for this one).

Their studies show the rule-activation phase alone can involve significant time delays when employees must switch back and forth between tasks. Moreover, the switch times get longer as the complexity of tasks increase. For employers, these delays can add up.



According to Meyer, “Not being able to concentrate for, say, tens of minutes at a time, may mean it’s costing a company as much as 20 percent to 40 percent.”

Research published by the National Institute of Mental Health not only supports these findings, but also shows that the time lapse is longer when subjects are asked to immediately switch back to a task they were performing than when they are allowed to wait a bit longer, which means more costly downtime for employers. And according to Meyer’s co-researcher Joshua Rubinstein, no industry is immune: “If you went in to an industry and identified a bunch of tasks that people in that industry do, you could very easily estimate what the losses were from having employees go through these shifts between tasks.”

What these findings suggest for the jansan industry is that cleaning methods, such as zone or gang, that require workers to complete lengthy sequences of often complex and different cleaning procedures can actually waste employers’ time and money, raising their already high labor costs.

### Performance and quality

Meyer is not the only scientist who believes multitasking lowers brainpower—and, therefore, performance—by diluting concentration. According to a study published in the psychology journal *NeuroImage*, managing two mental tasks at once reduces the brainpower available for either one. This finding was further supported by research that used functional magnetic resonance imaging, or MRIs, to prove brain activation is reduced up to 53 percent when subjects are asked to perform dual tasks versus being able to devote their full attention to one.

Additional research has brought the connection between multitasking and quality beyond the brain. For example, in clinical studies researching multitasking and the technical quality of the electrocardiograms (ECGs) taken by non-ECG technologists required to perform the function as a result of multitasking, researchers for the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton, Canada, concluded: “Multitasking has resulted in a high rate of unacceptable ECGs. There is a significant difference in the effectiveness and quality of ECG acquisition performed by ECG technologists and non-ECG technologists. Poorly acquired ECGs impede proper diagnosis for patients, subject the institution to potential medical-legal consequences, and add an unnecessary burden to the healthcare budget.”



Meanwhile, in his dissertation on the effects of multitasking on the ability of quality inspectors for advanced manufacturing systems (AMS) to spot defects, José A. Pesante-Santana found: “The best performance will be obtained when the additional tasks’ load minimizes the monotony of the quality inspection task without interfering with the processing resources needed for the memorized quality criteria.”

In other words, quality is best preserved when the scope of duties is varied enough to prevent boredom, but limited enough to allow workers to perform tasks properly, based on experience and developed expertise.

The bottom line: Relying on a cleaning system that requires workers to both cognitively and physically switch from one task to another may impede performance and quality, which can translate into less satisfied—and ultimately fewer—customers. In contrast, Team Cleaning’s specialized approach to cleaning provides the focus necessary to maintain the service levels of a high-quality cleaning operation.

### **Safety**

New research also now supports what many have long suspected: Multitasking can pose significant safety risks, not only to those performing the activities, but to people around them as well.

In his book highlighting the potential perils of multitasking, *Toxic Success*, best-selling writer and U.S. Army War College lecturer Paul Pearsall maintains that one of the military's biggest concerns has been the effect of multitasking on a person's attention span, believing it makes people less alert and more prone to error. Meanwhile, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that almost half the errors made by airplane crew members occurred because they were interrupted, distracted, or so preoccupied with one task that they ignored another. Similar findings were discovered in the healthcare industry.

In his research, Meyer summarized the hazards of cell phone use while driving: “It [cell phone use] draws more attention and more mental resources away from your primary task, which is driving the car: You’re more likely to have an accident.”

Meyer goes on to point out that in certain circumstances, a mere half a second lost to task switching can mean the difference between life and death. This danger of distraction holds true on the road—and elsewhere.



According to the Institute of Medicine's 1999 report on medical errors, *To Err is Human*, anywhere from 44,000 to 98,000 Americans die each year due to medical errors—more than die from breast cancer or motor vehicle accidents—and the number continues to climb.

Expounding on this statistic in *The Dangers of Multitasking*, author and online healthcare instructor Jeffrey Zurlinden, RN, MS, writes: "New research shows that multitasking can be dangerous for our patients. The more we try to multitask, the greater number of mistakes we make." According to Zurlinden, ongoing multitasking also can lead to health risks for workers themselves, including fatigue, anxiety, and depression.

Again, the message for the jansan industry is clear: A cleaning method, such as Team Cleaning, that cultivates knowledgeable specialists and allows them to concentrate on a well-defined set of duties reduces the chance of accidents while lowering potential healthcare expenses and legal liabilities for employers—as well as increasing work productivity and quality.

### **Worker Morale**

Research shows that rather than make people feel more productive, multitasking actually encourages workers to feel they are losing control over their responsibilities—and, more generally, their lives. And, adding to the health risks for workers he mentioned above, Zurlinden says that multitasking can cause job dissatisfaction, mental burnout and poor job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction "depends on flow, a concentrated focus that occurs during demanding, goal-oriented activities," he writes. "Constant interruptions interfere with flow."

According to Zurlinden, negative feelings can spread, creating disruptions for co-workers and supervisors and affecting the stability of the entire organization.

Relating this to the jansan industry, the question arises: Should the use of team specialists be mandatory for the cleaning industry? Probably not. But Dr. Just, co-director of the Carnegie Mellon University's Center for Cognitive Brain Imaging, may have summarized it best in his research on multitasking: "It doesn't mean you can't do several things at the same time [or switch back and forth between tasks in rapid succession]. But we're kidding ourselves if we think we can do so without cost."

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