

Measuring preference for multitasking

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A new study led by Elizabeth Poposki, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology in the School of Science at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, may help employers identify employees who enjoy multitasking and are less inclined to quit jobs involving multitasking. The study presents a new tool developed to measure preference for multitasking, information which may be of interest to bosses who tire of repeatedly hiring and training new employees.

A growing number of individuals must multitask at work and positions requiring a significant amount of [multitasking](#) typically have high turnover. Even positions which in the past did not require multitasking may now do so as staff reductions require remaining workers to pick up additional assignments. Technological innovations (e.g., e-mail) also create frequent interruptions. How workers feel about multitasking may influence their [job satisfaction](#) and the likelihood that they will quit, important factors in hiring and placement decisions.

Poposki and co-author Frederick L. Oswald, Ph.D., of Rice University, report on the conceptualization and design of the Multitasking Preference Inventory (MPI) in a study published in the current (July 2010) issue of the journal *Human Performance*.

"Multitasking has now become an important component of job performance for a growing number of professions - [air traffic controllers](#), 911 operators, taxi drivers, receptionists and countless others. We found that individuals who prefer to work on multiple tasks simultaneously enjoy the experience of multitasking more. This finding

may sound like common sense, but if we have a tool to assess who will enjoy multitasking and who will not, we may be able to do a better job of selecting employees who will flourish in jobs requiring multitasking," said Poposki, an industrial-organizational psychologist who takes a psychological perspective on analyzing the workplace.

In her next study she plans to use the new measuring tool in an attempt to predict job satisfaction and turnover among emergency response workers who multitask throughout their shifts.

Poposki notes that our current understanding of multitasking is relatively poor. Although many people believe that multitasking involves doing multiple things at once, the performance of multiple tasks actually requires the rapid shifting of attention among ongoing tasks.

"Neuroscientists tell us that the human brain is incapable of doing two things at once. What we do when we multitask is switch back and forth between tasks in a manner similar to how a computer goes back and forth between programs," said Poposki.

As multitasking becomes more prevalent in society and workplaces, a better understanding of which workers prefer to work on multiple tasks simultaneously may ultimately aid in practical issues such as staff selection and retention.

Provided by Indiana University School of Medicine

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