

## **Continuous Partial Attention**

### **by Linda Stone**

#### ***What is continuous partial attention?***

Continuous partial attention describes how many of us use our attention today. It is different from multi-tasking. The two are differentiated by the impulse that motivates them. When we multi-task, we are motivated by a desire to be more productive and more efficient. We're often doing things that are automatic, that require very little cognitive processing. We give the same priority to much of what we do when we multi-task — we file and copy papers, talk on the phone, eat lunch — we get as many things done at one time as we possibly can in order to make more time for ourselves and in order to be more efficient and more productive.

To pay continuous partial attention is to pay partial attention — CONTINUOUSLY. It is motivated by a desire to be a LIVE node on the network. Another way of saying this is that we want to connect and be connected. We want to effectively scan for opportunity and optimize for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, in any given moment. To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter.

We pay continuous partial attention in an effort NOT TO MISS ANYTHING. It is an always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that involves an artificial sense of constant crisis. We are always in high alert when we pay continuous partial attention. This artificial sense of constant crisis is more typical of continuous partial attention than it is of multi-tasking.

#### ***Is continuous partial attention a good thing or a bad thing?***

Like so many things, in small doses, continuous partial attention can be a very functional behavior. However, in large doses, it contributes to a stressful lifestyle, to operating in crisis management mode, and to a compromised ability to reflect, to make decisions, and to think creatively. In a 24/7, always-on world, continuous partial attention used as our dominant attention mode contributes to a feeling of overwhelm, over-stimulation and to a sense of being unfulfilled. We are so accessible, we're inaccessible. The latest, greatest powerful technologies have contributed to our feeling increasingly powerless.

#### ***Is this theory U.S. centric?***

In my research to date, most of the examples and time frames are U.S. centric. However, in looking at other cultures, there appears to be a similar

flow from one dominant attention paradigm into the next. We may not all find ourselves in the same attention era at the same time. We are likely to find ourselves experiencing a flow: attraction to an ideal, taking the expression of the ideal to an extreme and experiencing unintended and less than pleasant consequences, giving birth to and launching a new ideal while integrating the best of what came before.

### ***How does this play out with different generations?***

The younger generations are on the leading edge of thought for the coming dominant attention paradigm. This is one of the many reasons why the most successful companies are likely to effectively recruit, employ, incent, and manage representatives from every generation and keep an active listening channel toward the ideas and ideals, and the habits and passions of the younger generation.

When I've interviewed 18-22 year olds, I notice that they are often using communications technology in a mode that I call "semi-sync." It's not quite synchronous and it's not really asynchronous communication either. Text messaging is often used in a semi-sync way. When Jyri Engestrom, Jaiku co-founder, demonstrates Jaiku, he describes semi-sync usage patterns. Meanwhile, Matt Webb, in collaboration with Nokia, is experimenting with interfaces that ease the stress of continuous partial attention. Jyri is actively looking at ways to manage activity streams as well as interoperability issues.

Many in the generation now entering the workforce view phone calls as intrusive and prefer text messaging. In interviews, orbits of communication are described: My Space to keep up with a wide set of friends and acquaintances, text messaging for both one to one and one to many communications and, for one's closest friends, phone calls.

### ***What do we do about it?***

We have focused on managing our time. Our opportunity is to focus on how we manage our attention. We are evolving beyond an always-on lifestyle. As we make choices to turn the technology OFF, to give full attention to others in interactions, to block out interruption-free time, and to use the full range of communication tools more appropriately, we will re-orient our trek toward a path of more engaged attention, more fulfilling relationships, and opportunities for the type of reflection that fuels innovation.

BREATHE. Notice what happens to your breath as you pull down and check your email or vmail. Most of us hold our breath. Some of us tighten our

upper body. If we're aware of what we're doing and we are able to manage our breath — that is, keep breathing — the stress response is minimized.

How do we react to friends and loved ones who just can't put the phone or Blackberry away — there are a range of approaches. When you sit down to a meal, you can let them know that you're putting your phone/Blackberry away so you can focus your attention on them. You can let them know you're expecting one call you need to take for 2 minutes, and after that, you'll be putting your device away. You can choose activities that require full attention or activities that you would be able to enjoy whether they were on their Blackberry or not.

### ***Why care?***

There is a wonderful evolution taking place. Understanding how it's unfolding offers insights into what drives us and what inspires us.

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