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What Henry Ford Taught Us About Specializing

 JANUARY 21, 2014  [ANNIK STAHL](#)

spe-cial-ize (v.): To concentrate on a particular activity or product.

We've all been there: focused on a task and making progress. Suddenly the phone rings and *poof*— the magic is lost, the spell broken.

When we finally get an opportunity to return to the job, we've lost our bearings and the groove is gone.

This happens in all aspects of our life, often multiple times a day, and it can provoke frustration, annoyance, and even anger. It's not just about the phone, either. Surely you've had the experience of finally sitting down to have dinner with family or friends when the unswervingly earnest young person with her environmentally-friendly clipboard knocks on your front door to get you to sign the Bacteria Rights Act. Or maybe you're having one of those super-energetic (and often most effective) ad hoc hallway meetings at work when it's



time for the monthly fire drill.

Whatever the event, your dinner is cold, your train of thought gone, and you sheepishly realize it was you leaning against the box that set off the alarm.

While those may seem to be flippant examples of inconvenience and disruption, when you're entrenched in a workflow process, regular interruptions can translate into irrecoverable productivity and crumbling dollars.

In this Information Age of inescapable connectedness, it's virtually impossible to ignore incoming phone calls, faxes, texts, emails, and who knows what's next — B2B (brain-to-brain) beta waves from clients, customers, telemarketers???

Get out of the pool



If you have an entire department of employees keying in receivables, you can bet there are plenty of interruptions. Because if you're not employing some sort of automation system for your receivables workflow, your data entry folks have to stop every so often to deal with...that's right: the dreaded exceptions, the items that didn't post during processing and need to be further scrutinized.

Imagine it: The people you've hired to manually enter all the information from every one of the company's receivables are enthusiastically clicking away — tippity-tap, tappity-tip — entering data as fast as their fingers can fly. But every so often — and this will happen — each member of that conscientious crew will be

forced to stop. Why? Because even when there are no phones, no fax machines, no distractions, and no other waiting tasks, when the Enterprise Resource Planning software (ERP) says that the item just entered is not valid (over pay, short pay, bad invoice, etc.), your dexterous data clerks have to stop their data keying process and switch over to “think mode” to handle the exception. And who knows how long that will take. Will they need to make one phone call? Two calls? Wait for an answer? Or just pass the buck to someone else, someone who may or may not have the answer?

This is a world-class problem, but when you enable an innovative, automated workflow process, you’re on your way to solving it, at least when you’re dealing all those with receivables. (You’re on our own with *No Soliciting* signs at home and the Fire Marshall’s requirements.)

The Model T as model

The auto industry has proven that when you hire people to do one thing and do it well, you’re essentially guaranteed efficiency. Almost exactly 100 years ago, Henry Ford broke up the Model T’s assembly into 84 distinct steps,



creating the world’s first assembly line. Ford then trained each of his workers to work on one step and master it. Workers became specialists, and that shift of responsibilities slashed the time it took to build one car from 12 hours to about three.

The same thing can happen when you automate a certain aspect of receivables processing — the somewhat mindless keying in of data — and instead utilize your employees’ critical thinking skills to

move your company forward. You hired people for their brains—now's the time to use them. When exceptions crop up (as they're bound to do) you've now got a team of adept specialists who can expertly handle them — and do it efficiently. When it's your employee's main job — his forte — your newly-minted exception handling specialist is now more effective at performing the one task he was hired to do.

Are your [accounts receivable tactics losing you money](#) ____? Consider automating and give that long-neglected department a leading edge. And don't forget: When you start running smooth and efficient A/R, don't be surprised when you see a significant reduction in Day Sales Outstanding (DSO), increased cash availability, and your people more engaged in success.

“What we need are more people who specialize in the impossible.” — Theodore Roethke, American Poet

