



The Myth of Multitasking

The awful truth: It's actually counter-productive.

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For years, I have tried to conduct multiple tasks and functions at the same time. I have answered emails while returning phone calls to patients; I have added to my to-do list when listening to patients in the exam room; and, even worse, texted on my mobile phone while driving my car.

I took a management course at Loyola University and was shown a video¹ made in the psychology department at Harvard University in the 1980s where two teams—one in white and the other in black—threw a basketball. I was asked to pay attention and count how many times the white team tossed the ball in the 30-second video. While I was concentrating on counting the passes made by the people in white shirts, a man in a gorilla suit strolled into the middle of the action, faced the camera, and thumped his chest, and then left, spending nine seconds on screen. We were then queried how many saw the gorilla?

The results revealed that half of the people who watched the video and were counting the passes of the basketball missed seeing the gorilla. It was as though the gorilla was invisible.

This video, which has been viewed over 21 million times on YouTube, revealed two things: that we are missing what goes on around us, and that we also have no idea what we are missing. This video has been used to help explain what we see and what we don't see. I received a third message that when I was focused on one task, i.e., counting the number of passes made by the white team, I was blinded by other events, i.e., passing

phone—can be a way of making tasks more fun and energizing, there is evidence that you lose your focus. Multitasking requires shifting focus from one task to another in rapid succession. It gives the illusion that we are more efficient, but we are not. It's like playing tennis with three balls in play.

In fact, levels of the stress hormone cortisol are increased when people are multitasking. This can become a vicious cycle, because in-

“There is time enough for everything in the course of the day, if you do but one thing at once, but there is not time enough in the year, if you will do two things at a time.”—Lord Chesterfield, 1740

the basketball, that were taking place. This was evidence that I couldn't do two or more tasks at the same time.

When asked about quality of work performed, as more multitasking took place, the quality of the work performed decreased.² Although multitasking may seem to be saving time, psychologists are finding that multitasking can result in a great deal of stress and make us less efficient.

Although doing many things at the same time—reading an article while listening to music, switching to check email messages, and talking on the

created levels of cortisol further impede our cognitive functioning, leading to even greater stress.³

Technology is a major culprit in the temptation to multitask, and the multitasking culture that exists in our society has major implications for our practices. According to one study, employees lose up to two hours of productivity a day because of distractions such as checking their cell phones while at work.

Recently the tide has changed dramatically. Numerous studies have

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shown the sometimes-fatal danger of using cell phones and other electronic devices while driving, for example, and several states have now made that particular form of multitasking illegal. In the business world, where concerns about time management are perennial, warnings about workplace distractions spawned by a multitasking culture are on the rise. In 2005, the BBC reported on a research study, funded by Hewlett-Packard and conducted by the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of London, that found that workers distracted by email and phone calls suffer a fall in IQ scores more than twice the decrease in scores found in marijuana smokers.⁴

The psychologist who led the study called this new “infomania” a serious threat to workplace productivity. One of the *Harvard Business Review*’s “Breakthrough Ideas” for 2007 was Linda Stone’s notion of “continuous partial attention,” which might be translated as multitasking: while using mobile computing power and the Internet, we are constantly scanning for op-

estimated that information overload costs the U.S. economy \$650 billion a year in lost productivity.⁷

Multitasking and Flow

William James, the great psychologist, compared our stream of thought to a river, and bottlenecks that obstruct the flow of water in the river. When an obstruction occurs, a setback, or a logjam, occurs, which slows the current, creates turbulence in the river, and makes logs floating in the river stop moving or

of our day either rapidly switching from one task to another or juggling two or more things at the same time. Although multitasking may give the illusion of saving time, it is nothing more than a magic trick on the mind and results in a great deal of stress, which makes us less efficient. The advice from all this is to work on one task at a time, take a break, go to the next task, and, if necessary, come back to the first task. You will find this contributes to your productivity and reduces your stress level. **PM**

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temporarily move the other way.⁸

For some people, James noted, this challenge is never overcome; such people get their work done only between episodes of mind-wandering. However, it is true that we can do a couple of things at the same time if they are routine, such as folding the laundry and listening to music, but once they

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portunities and staying on top of work, on our social engagements, and on activities in an effort to miss nothing.⁵

Dr. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and ADHD expert, calls multitasking a mythical activity in which people believe or have the illusion that they can perform two or more tasks simultaneously. The doctor described a new condition, “attention deficit trait,” which he claims is rampant in the business world and, and most likely, in the healthcare profession as well. He recommends limiting multitasking and instead working by single or “unitasking”.⁶

One study by researchers at the University of California at Irvine monitored interruptions among office workers. They found that workers took an average of 25 minutes to recover from interruptions such as phone calls or answering email and return to their original task. It is

demand a more cognitive process, the brain has a severe bottleneck.

In the future, new technology, such as sensors or smart software that workers could program with their preferences and priorities to serve as a high tech “time nanny” to ease the modern multitasker’s plight, may be available. Perhaps we will all accept the use of a computer governor—like the devices placed on engines so that people can’t drive cars beyond a certain speed or can’t start their car if they have consumed excess alcohol. Our mental governors might prompt us with reminders to set mental limits when we try to do too much, too quickly, or all at once.

Bottom Line

Unfortunately, we’ve accepted multitasking in the workplace without question. Virtually all of us, physicians included, spend part or most

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