

Productive to the Max

Productivity

Performance

Profitability

Is Multitasking a Good Idea?

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When I travel, without even realizing it, I multitask. This drives my husband crazy as I push my cart through the terminal, look in shop windows, text on my cell phone, assess fellow travelers, watch for the correct terminal and gate, and think about where my next meal is going to come from. As a result I am always running into people and offering excuses or apologies. Is it a good idea to perform one, two or even three tasks simultaneously? There is so much to do during the day that sometimes we feel the need to multitask to get everything done.

Due to the increasing number of layoffs, corporations now assume that few can do the work of many. People are encouraged to perform several tasks simultaneously, as quickly as possible, shift their attention and switch back and forth mentally between tasks. The availability of multiple technologies encourages the practice. Is focusing your conscious awareness on more than one place or thing at a time productive? The research says "no" except when performing small, easy and quick procedures.

According to Joshua Rubinstein, David Meyer and Jeffrey Evans (Human Perception and Performance, Journal of Experimental Psychology, 27(4) 2001), our capacity for multitasking has its limits. Their study showed that participants lost time in performance speed when switching tasks (solving mathematical questions and classifying geometric shapes) and they lost more time as the tasks increased in complexity. However, when the tasks were easier, in the sense that participants found them familiar, their time of completion speeded up.

In another study, Russell Poldrack, a psychology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that "multitasking adversely affects how you learn. Even if you learn while multitasking, that learning is less flexible and more specialized, so you cannot retrieve the information as easily." Discussing his research on National Public Radio, Poldrack warned, "We have to be aware that there is a cost to the way that our society is changing, that humans are not built to work this way. We're really built to focus. And when we sort of force ourselves to multitask, we're driving ourselves to perhaps be less efficient in the long run even though it sometimes feels like we're being more efficient."

Productivity means that you are able to concentrate focus and prioritize important items and topics that require your attention. This concentration is compromised when you multitask and move too quickly. It takes you longer to perform the specific action; the quality of your work is compromised; you miss important facts; scrimp on procedures and reduce the quality of your task. You lose 20% -30% of your time when you constantly switch tasks.

What steps can you take to reduce the opportunities to multitask?

- Stop, focus and concentrate. I suggest you use some sort of physical item like a stress ball or a nice picture to provide a focal point that will encourage you to stop and reorient to where you are at that particular time of day. Practice deep breathing to help you relax.
- Get the mental clutter out of your head by creating systems that allow you to capture information in one place. It could be just a notebook, a steno pad or a document in your computer. To do lists and task lists also do the job well. Train yourself to refrain from using those sticky notes or pieces of paper. If you communicate regularly with different people, and those brilliant flashes of insight come upon you that you want to share with others, create a file system with their individual names and jot down what you want to tell them instead of interrupting your current task. Save up several thoughts or ideas then make an appointment with that person to share the information. This is especially useful if you have an assistant.
- Combine common things together both physically in your space and when you plan your day. This will allow your concentration to focus on similar activities and really deal with the situation at hand. Batch all your emails together and deal with them several times a day. Do the same with your phone calls, faxes, forms and processes, contact lists and web site addresses. You wouldn't go to the gym in the morning to lift weights, then return at noon to swim and come back in the evening to run the track. You would go one time and complete all the activities in order to have the rest of the day free for other pursuits. Follow that same thinking when you plan your day.
- Reduce all interruptions by learning to say no and prioritizing. Know what has to be done and what you can afford to leave until later. Turn off all the bells and whistles (especially on your email) so you stay in the moment. If you have to be interrupted by something urgent, take a second to mark down where you are in your file or your document; close it, then direct your attention to the urgency. Do not make the interruption into any more of a task than necessary at that time. When you return you will know exactly where you left off.

- Create not only a to-do list that breaks down all projects into small tasks, but also a "not- to- do list". Post it so you can access in regularly when you feel the urge to change tasks.
- Plan everything you have to do either in your calendar or on to-do lists. Allocate time for each item and stick to it by using a timer or some sort of reminder (NOT a bell or whistle!).
- Schedule according to your energy levels. If you are more productive in the morning, then use and plan that time for high energy and important tasks; those that require a lot of creativity and concentration and even those you hate. If you get those done during optimum times, you will be less inclined to multitask.
- A long project stretched out in front of you is mentally overwhelming and encourages procrastination which leads to the "catching up quickly" process. Always break down tasks into smaller chunks. It is more motivating, encouraging and allows you to stop and switch tasks, if you must, by at least completing a portion of what has to be done.
- Set up routines and processes that you constantly tweak and improve. When you take on a new task, analyze whether you can utilize current procedures to make this process more efficient. Multitasking becomes easier, scientists believe, when you make parts of the process routine.
- Use timers and alarms to set limits for your tasks. They will remind you when to switch tasks and allow you to completely concentrate on the job at hand knowing that an outside source will remind you when to stop.

Remember that multi-tasking is not an efficient process due to the need to switch gears for each new task and switch back again. Become better at estimating time and learn to deal with everything you have to do, one step at a time.