

How and why we should all stop multi-tasking

During a conference call with the executive team of a rep firm, I decided to send an email to another customer. I know, I know. You'd think I would have learned. What could go wrong?

First I sent the customer the message. Then I sent him another one with the attachment I had forgotten to append. In my third email, I explained why the attachment he received wasn't the one he was expecting. When I eventually refocused on the call, I realized I hadn't heard a crucial question.

Multi-tasking makes you stupid.

I swear I wasn't smoking anything, but apparently I was acting as if I had. A recent study has shown that IQs drop by 10 points in people who are distracted by email and phone calls. That's more than twice the effect of smoking marijuana.

We're only fooling ourselves when we think we get more done by doing several things at once. In reality, new research shows that our productivity can decline by up to 40 percent. We don't actually multi-task; we switch-task, rapidly shifting from one activity to another, interrupting ourselves and losing time.

You might think you're different and that you have multi-tasked so much you're an expert. But you'd be wrong. Recent findings show that heavy multi-taskers are less competent at doing several things at once than light multi-taskers. The more you multi-task, the worse you are at it.

An experiment in non-multi-tasking

I decided to do an experiment. For one week I would not multi-task and see what happened. When I was on the phone, I would only talk or listen. In a meeting I would only concentrate on the meeting. I didn't think I could sustain that kind of focus, but it turns out I was pretty successful, at least most of the time.

During the week I discovered six new ways of looking at the world:

1. The experience was delightful. When you stop checking for email, you stay in closer touch with your surroundings. I noticed this phenomenon especially with my teenage sons. Normally I feel they don't want to interact with me much, given how uncool I am. However, I was surprised to notice how often they initiated a conversation when I wasn't constantly responding to the email ping.

2. I made significant progress on challenging projects. I usually try to distract myself from work that requires thought and persistence, such

as writing and strategizing. However, without distractions, I was able to plow through the uncomfortable times and overcome the blocks.

3. My stress dropped dramatically. Research shows that multi-tasking isn't just inefficient, it's stressful. I can vouch for the stress factor. I felt liberated from the strain of keeping so many balls in the air, and I experienced a sense of accomplishment when I finished one task before going on to the next.

4. I lost all patience with time-wasting activities. An hour-long meeting seemed interminable, and a meandering conversation was excruciating. I focused my attention like a laser beam on my list and quickly burned through the "to-do's."

5. I had tremendous patience for enjoyable activities. I was in no rush to end conversations with my customers, and my mind stayed focused when I was brainstorming about a difficult issue.

6. Single-tasking has no downside. No one became frustrated with me for not answering a call or failing to return an email the second I received it.

Why don't we all just stop multi-tasking?

So, why not use all your brain's energy to listen to a prospect on the phone while booking a trip to Paris online? Sounds good, except the brain is already working at capacity when you're doing just one task. It is picking up conversational nuances or thinking about what you've just heard. Ask it to take on a second or third task, and you take away its ability to deal fully with the first one.

How do we resist the temptation? Turn the distractions off. I often write and plan at 6:30 a.m. Following my successful experiment, I continue to leave my cell phone and email off just in case a multi-tasker is trying to reach me. I turn my car phone off too. ... sometimes. (Other single-task warriors I know leave their cell phones in the trunk.)

Use your impatience constructively. So you're itchy without all the ring tones and email pings to answer. Fill that void by creating unrealistically short deadlines. Give yourself a third of the time you think you need to accomplish a task. There's nothing like a deadline to fully occupy your brain. If you have only 30 minutes to finish a presentation, you're not going to take a call or flip back an email.

Ironically, single-tasking to meet a tight deadline will reduce your stress, and it just might help you to be more productive.



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