
WHY MORE IS LESS ; RECENT EVIDENCE SHOWS THAT MULTITASKING IS AN ENORMOUS WASTE OF YOUR TIME AND YOUR COMPANY'S MONEY.

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Business conditions are so universally dismal that the corporate slogan for most American companies might as well be "We Do More with Less." That places a heavy burden on employees who are often stretched to their limits. Consequently, multitasking--both in the sense of doing more than one task at a time as well as switching among tasks--has taken on an added importance at companies that have experienced either layoffs or hiring freezes or both (usually both). Since these companies are now chronically understaffed, conventional wisdom decrees that those still on the job be as efficient as possible. Hence the need to juggle as many jobs as one can.

But there's a problem with multitasking. Not only does it take a personal toll on employees, it also doesn't work.

In a February Wall Street Journal column, writer Sue Shellenbarger cited a growing body of research evidence that indicates multitasking actually erodes, rather than enhances, productivity. As people divide their attention between two even seemingly simple tasks--reading their e-mail, for instance, while talking on the phone--comprehension, concentration and short-term memory suffer. Switching from one job to another doesn't work any better. Research indicates that that eats up more time than waiting to finish one job before beginning the next--an inefficiency that increases as the tasks at hand become more complicated. Toggling back and forth between a review of the fine print on a vendor's service-level agreement and a discussion about the amortization of next year's IT investments with your CFO over the phone? Not a terrific time-saving strategy after all.

ATTENTION IS A FINITE RESOURCE

The inutility of multitasking as a productivity tool makes perfect sense when understood in terms of attention and available resources. "Current cognitive models suggest that people have a limited amount of attention available at any moment," says Seth Greenberg, a professor of psychology at Union College. "Attention could be thought of as a fuel that can be dispersed. Thus, tasks can be performed simultaneously with efficiency as long as the required attention for both tasks does not exceed the limit." In other words, a person can multitask effectively as long as any given task doesn't require too much attention and thereby exhaust his resources.

For example, if one is riding one's bike through a sylvan glade, one can let one's mind work on a math problem. The riding can be done on autopilot, and a great deal of attention can be paid to the math. But when conditions change, and piloting the bike demands more attention--say, in rush hour traffic or on uneven ground--the performance of one or both of the tasks breaks down. One can ride safely--or solve the problem--but not both, because the demands upon the finite resource of attention have escalated. And if one insists upon attempting both, the consequence can be a nasty spill.

IF IT'S NOT ONE THING, IT'S ANOTHER

Similarly, shuttling among two or three different pieces of work can be accomplished efficiently provided each one is relatively simple and they are adequately differentiated from one another. Where trouble arises, says Greenberg, is with problem-solving types of tasks, the kind that require creativity, integration of thoughts, and the generation of new ideas. Switching among such tasks

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demands a certain degree of downtime. The fuel cell of imagination can only be drained for so long before it needs to be recharged. Attempting to solve a problem with a dead imagination is a recipe for failure, not to mention a large waste of time.

I felt relieved when I first read about multitasking's insidious tax on productivity. My idea of productive multitasking is listening to music while huffing on a treadmill. I've never been comfortable juggling plural assignments, preferring instead to follow a linear approach. I like to focus on one project, work on it uninterrupted from beginning to end, and then--and only then--move on to the next thing. Unfortunately, I've rarely been afforded the luxury to work in this fashion either way back when at school or today in my current job. Deadlines overlap, meetings intervene and colleagues have needs that never seem to coincide with the downtime in my schedule. (The one exception in my life that I faithfully pursue in a linear manner is yard work: first the trimmer, then the mower, then the weeding by hand.) The world of work just doesn't fit into neat and tidy compartments for most of us, even when we aren't under the gun to take up the slack caused by understaffing. At least now I know I'm not lacking a multitasking gene. Following a day of task- juggling, my attention span rivals that of a toddler's--and that, I'm happy to learn, is completely normal.

"Someone can spend two to three hours a day [of downtime] acclimating to different projects just to gain the focus needed to be productive," Raynor says. If Raynor's assessment is accurate, it's easy to put a number to that kind of brain drain. Say our overtaxed, multitasking analyst makes \$75 an hour and works 1,500 hours a year. That means the two to three hours a day she spends recharging her imagination in order to multitask cost her company about \$50,000 annually. That's money being spent just getting up to speed to do actual, productive work.

Darrel Raynor, a managing director with Data Analysis & Results, has been aware of multitasking's damaging effects on productivity for a number of years. Raynor, who works with companies to create project management offices as a way of boosting IT productivity, says a database analyst asked to switch among four projects will likely be 45 percent less productive than if she's allowed to finish one before starting the next.

MULTITASKING AND ME

Unfortunately, even in the face of the mounting scientific and anecdotal evidence (not to mention individual blood pressure and stress levels) that multitasking doesn't work, companies cling to it like shipwrecked survivors to flotsam. They believe that asking employees to multitask saves them money and time when chances are good that it will do neither. This unintelligent intransigence is all the more troubling because most of us intuitively recognize the problems multitasking can pose. We cringe at the thought of someone operating a lathe while scanning the crawl on CNN or a teenager talking on a cell phone while driving. True, none of us are going to lose a digit or rear-end a minivan because we're typing, listening to voice mail and reading instant messages simultaneously. But as Greenberg says, when one's attention is divided, something's got to give. Companies that see multitasking as part of the solution to their staffing issues are actually making their problems worse and are not, finally, doing more with less. They are doing less with less.

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