



Rainey Foster, senior vice president at the speakers bureau Leading Authorities, is an admitted "master multitasker," but she has developed a method to ensure that she keeps herself focused at work. "I have an unconventional way of prioritizing by placing all project folders on the floor," she says. "Then I simply don't leave the office until I have picked up and dealt with each of them. There is something about getting everything off of my desk and then having to rehandle each folder that yields a better level of concentration."

### **Unmasking Multitasking**

But does multitasking truly enable people to accomplish more at work, home, or in between? Not necessarily, according to recent research. A study published by the *American Psychological Association's Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* found that the effects of multitasking can actually be counterproductive.

"People in a work setting who are banging away on word processors at the same time they have to answer phones and talk to their coworkers or bosses — they're doing switches all the time," says study coauthor David Meyer, Ph.D. Not being able to concentrate for, say, ten minutes at a time may cost an organization as much as 20 to 40 percent of its income, says Meyers. Researchers even have a name for this expense: "time cost."

"In effect," Meyer explains, "you've got writer's block briefly as you go from one task to another. You've got to make a decision to switch tasks, actually make the switch, and then get warmed back up on what you were doing."

This see-sawing attention can even prove dangerous. Talking on a cell phone while driving, for instance, may seem safe enough, but you may not realize how much attention it requires. According to Meyer, "A lot of folks think, 'Well, cell phoning while driving is really no big deal, and I can get away with it.' Even if you have a cell phone that's not held by hand and can be dialed by voice, you still have a really big conflict, because when you're driving, you need to be looking at various places. You need to be reading signs. You need to be talking to yourself about those in order to — through your mental speech — make decisions about where to go with your car. And there's no way to do that while on the cell phone, because you have to use your 'inner ears' and 'inner speech' and even your 'inner eyes' to imagine what the person on the phone is talking about."

The same study also shows that the risks of multitasking increase with more difficult tasks. "A very simple conversation on the phone while driving a car — maybe 'Honey, please pick up some bread on the way home' — might not draw too much concentration," Rubinstein says. "But if the conversation becomes difficult or emotionally charged or mentally taxing — 'Honey, the house is burning down; what should I do?' — it draws more attention and more mental resources away from your primary task, which is driving the car. You're more likely to have an accident." And haven't we all burned ourselves at least once while pulling something out of the oven, talking on the phone, and glancing sideways to check on the children?

### **Curbing the Urge**

Aside from the possible physical dangers of multitasking, though, is the psychic toll. Workers on the job ingest an estimated aggregate of 15 tons of aspirin daily just in the United States. Research finds that at least one in four workers contends with anxiety-related illness, and job-related stress accounts for most of the absenteeism and illness that the typical professional today experiences. Could workplace multitasking be a contributing factor?

Possibly. Researchers at the Medical College of Wisconsin have discovered if you perform a task as simple as tapping your foot, you activate the primary motor in your cortex, a section of your brain. If your task is more involved, if it includes planning to tap your foot to a sequence (such as onetwo, onetwothree, onetwo, onetwothree), then two secondary motor areas in the front of the cortex are engaged. You are drawing on more of your brain's functioning capacity. Don't worry, though; your brain can handle it most of the time.

The point is that when you engage in multitasking, your brain function changes to incorporate the extra activities, so if you want to do the best at whatever you're doing, allow your brain to concentrate on one activity at a time. If it's a complex task, consider whether you're working on several parts of the same task or two different tasks.

When speaking at conventions and executive retreats, I sometimes conduct a brief exercise with my audiences by asking them to take out their watches and do nothing but stare at them for a solid minute. Few can do it. In this society, you are fed a message that emphasizes the importance of motion and activity. Merely reading, thinking, or reflecting doesn't look busy or productive enough.

But you should memorize the words of Alexander Hamilton:

"Men give me some credit for genius. All the genius I have lies in this: When I have a subject at hand, I study it profoundly. Day and night it is before me. I explore it in all its bearings. My mind becomes pervaded with it. Then the effort which I have made is what people are pleased to call the fruit of genius. It is instead the fruit of labor and thought."

You and a friend can easily test whether Hamilton's example of focused living could boost your own productivity. Decide on any three minor tasks in which the two of you can engage simultaneously. One task could be stacking pennies; another could be drawing 15 stars on a blank sheet of paper; a third could be linking paper clips. You each have the same number of items.

You and your friend start these tasks at the same time. You stack a few pennies at a time, make a few stars on a blank piece of paper, and link some paper clips, indiscriminately alternating the three tasks. Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, your friend stacks an equal number of pennies to completion. He then turns to making 15 stars on a page and, when done, finally links all of the paper clips.

Who do you think will finish faster, with greater ease, and in better shape mentally and emotionally? I'll bet on your friend who focused on the task at hand, took it to completion, and then turned to the next one while you were bouncing back and forth between activities. You may have been more prone to errors, such as knocking over your penny stack. Even if you were quite an adept task juggler, you probably couldn't keep pace, or your work quality was not as good. Perhaps your paper clips became tangled, or your 15 stars lacked artistic merit. Multiply the effect of this test by how often you flip flop between activities in a day or year, and it's easy to understand why you're losing productivity.

### Dismissing Distractions

In 1990, author Alvin Toffler told me that the workplace is a terrible place to get things done these days. With the distractions in your office, it's often better to work at the library, in the conference room, or on a park bench.

I was once consulting for a supervisor in Minnesota with six employees. He wanted to use his time more efficiently and focus better. He said his employees came to him with questions every couple of hours. That seemed harmless enough, but look at how it built up: If an employee asked a question every two hours, the supervisor got four from that person each day. With six employees, that meant 24 questions a day or 120 interruptions a week, resulting in disruptions of the manager's work three times each hour in a 40-hour week! I devised a system to help him cope with the interruptions and regain control of his time; I called it the "J4 System," with "J" standing for his name, Jeff.

I asked the supervisor to put the questions into four categories of manageability. The first category question, J1, was already answered in print and did not need a personal reply; it was in the company policy manual. The supervisor told his employees, "Please don't bother me with J1 distractions."

The second category question, J2, was one that a peer or bookkeeper could answer; the supervisor did not need to be bothered with this type of question either. J3s needed only a short yes-or-no answer. Such questions required interaction with the supervisor but not much. The final category, J4 distractions, required the supervisor's response.

How many questions were at the J4 level of importance? Even assuming each person asked two J4 questions per day, 60 interruptions each week, the number of interruptions to Jeff's workday decreased by half. Almost immediately, the supervisor was able to better use his time, increase his concentration, and reduce his stress.

If you've been multitasking for a long time and suddenly attempt to switch to working on one thing at a time, guess what happens? You may feel a sudden increase in anxiety. It's like trying to kick an addiction to a chemical stimulant. The natural inclination is to get back into the addiction. So it is with multitasking.

To become a master of doing one thing at a time, pick an activity you enjoy, where there's a high probability that you can engage in it without doing anything else. It might be driving your car with the radio off, reading in your favorite armchair without snacking, or listening to music instead of banishing it to the background.

Start with small segments. If you're reading in your favorite armchair, promise yourself you'll go 10 minutes without any munchies the first night. The second night, go 15. You may soon be able to read for an hour without having to resort to snacks.

If you're involved in conceptual thinking or creative problem solving ("How can we adjust our budget to save for a trip to Europe?"), find as quiet and comfortable a place as possible. Hang a "Please Do Not Disturb" sign nearby and consider listing a time when you will be available to converse.

If you are confronted by many tasks competing for your attention, identify the one that is most important and stay with it until completion or for as long as you can. If you're temporarily pulled away by something else, return to the important task at hand immediately.

People are likely to face more distractions in the future, not fewer. For today, give yourself the benefit of working on one thing at a time. You may have to switch gears when your child returns from school or the doctor calls back — but when you switch gears, switch them entirely. Give your complete attention to the pressing issue at hand. You likely will find that this is a more effective way to actually check off your to-do list or complete that tax return in an afternoon.

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