

Five Myths of Multitasking

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By Kelly Eggers

How many tabs do you have open in your Web browser right now? How many of them are work-related? How many of them are centered on the same task?

Multitasking, conducting two unrelated tasks at the same time, causes errors that could cost you your job, say experts.



If you're writing a document while looking at a related spreadsheet, that doesn't fall under the umbrella of multitasking. But if you're bouncing between deciding on an issue while chatting with friends and reading the news, you're likely to compromise on each of those actions -- possibly without even realizing it.

Some common side effects of multitasking include -- but are not limited to -- missing key instructions, misplacing decimal points, accidentally replying-all to emails, and the inability to hold a thought for an extended period of time.

"If you're multitasking, you can absolutely be guaranteed that you won't get the full message from someone who's giving you instructions," says Pam Vaccaro, CEO of St. Louis-based time-management consultancy Designs on Time and a professional speaker on time and focus management. "People want things right away because we can deliver them right away."

You might think you're above being affected by multitasking. The truth is, you're not. That's just one of the many myths of multitasking; here are the top five.

Myth 1: Only Younger Workers Multitask

In a survey of 1000 professionals conducted by People-OnTheGo, a consultancy that helps companies overcome information overload, a majority of workers from all generations, excluding those 65 and older, said they interrupt work to check e-mail or Facebook more often than they'd like to or constantly. Pierre Khawand, founder and CEO of the Silicon Valley-based company, says that the results indicate that while multitasking might be slightly more prevalent among the younger set, it's by no means limited to them.

Furthermore, experts say that younger workers are no better at it than older workers.

"There's a tendency to believe that the younger generations can manage [multitasking] better," says Vaccaro, "but whether you're 23 or 103, your brain can only focus on one thing at a time."

Myth 2: Multitasking Increases Productivity

"In the workplace today, our productivity curve is interrupted," says Khawand. Uninterrupted employees see productivity on a task increase over time. However, in today's workplace, focus periods are punctuated by e-mail notifications, instant messaging, or urgent requests from colleagues and supervisors. "When we're interrupted, our results drop down to zero," explains Khawand. "It's exhausting for the brain."

Say you're in your office typing an e-mail, and your colleague comes over to have a quick conversation with you. "The amount of time it takes me to get refocused is going to take even longer than the amount of time than it would to have that quick conversation," says Laura Leist, author of *Eliminate Chaos at Work: 25 Techniques to Increase Productivity*.

It takes time to reload short-term memory and determine where we were in the thought process when switching back and forth between tasks, says Khawand. "These are short spurts of low production," he says, "and we're only achieving a small five to 10% of the results we could be getting if we stayed focused."

Myth 3: Practice Makes Perfect

Clifford Nass, a communication professor at Stanford and author of *The Man Who Lied to His Laptop*, conducted research in 2009 on media multitaskers. The results of his study found that "the people who think they're good at multitasking are actually the worst at it, and the people who think they are bad at it are ironically better at it." And though it may seem counter-intuitive, he found that the more frequently people multitask, the worse they get at it -- and the less likely they are to even realize the mistakes they're making.

Constant task-switching can also affect our quality of output. "When we're working two minutes here and two minutes there, it's really hard to get deep into anything," says Khawand. "We lose the ability to think strategically and solve deep issues."

Experts suggest that as the sloppy and inattentive are weeded out, those who are able to maintain focus and diligence in an era of distractions will be brought in to replace them. "No one takes the time to do one thing anymore," says Vaccaro. "I want to hire the people who do."

Myth 4: People are Completely Understanding

"Multitasking has never proven to be a good communication or relationship-building skill," says Vaccaro, a message for everyone who has said "I'm listening" to a friend while simultaneously typing a text message or reading an e-mail. "Your brain can't do it. You'll get pieces of both, but not either completely," she says. Bottom line, says Vaccaro: "It's rude, and tells people that their presence isn't that important."

Much of it comes from the "I need it now" culture that's been created in many workplaces, says Leist. "People are trying to do things so quickly," she says, that people skim e-mails and send back incomplete replies. "People don't stop to read and listen," she says. "You have to send an additional e-mail asking the person to please answer your e-mail."

Myth 5: You Need to Be a Good Multitasker to Land a Job

"At some point in the interview process, most companies will ask if you can multitask," says Vaccaro, "but what they really should ask is if you can handle multiple priorities and projects."

Nass says that a skill employers should look for is the ability to know when multitasking isn't an option -- something that's swiftly becoming a rarity. "You should say that you know when to stop multitasking. That's an incredibly important skill," he says.

"More and more employers are finding that based on our research, multitaskers are the worst way to go," says Nass. "They need people who can unitask, and don't freak out when they have to concentrate because they've gotten into the habit of not thinking hard. Speed is important, but thinking is even more important."

What You Should Do

So how do you avoid falling into the black hole of multi-tasking?

-- Turn off e-mail notification sounds and pop-up windows, and silence (or, even better, shut off) your cell phone while at work.

-- Set boundaries among your colleagues. When you have headphones on, for example, it might mean that only the most urgent interruptions are okay.

-- Make a detailed list of the individual steps you need to complete to finish a project, so you can spend less time figuring out where you were after an interruption.

-- Reward a stretch of productivity with some social and collaborative activities, like chatting with friends and responding to e-mails, to strike the delicate balance between singular focus and multitasking.

Laura Leist, CPO, is the author of *Eliminate the Chaos at Work: 25 Techniques to Increase Productivity* and the founder of Eliminate Chaos – a business and residential organizing and productivity consulting services firm.