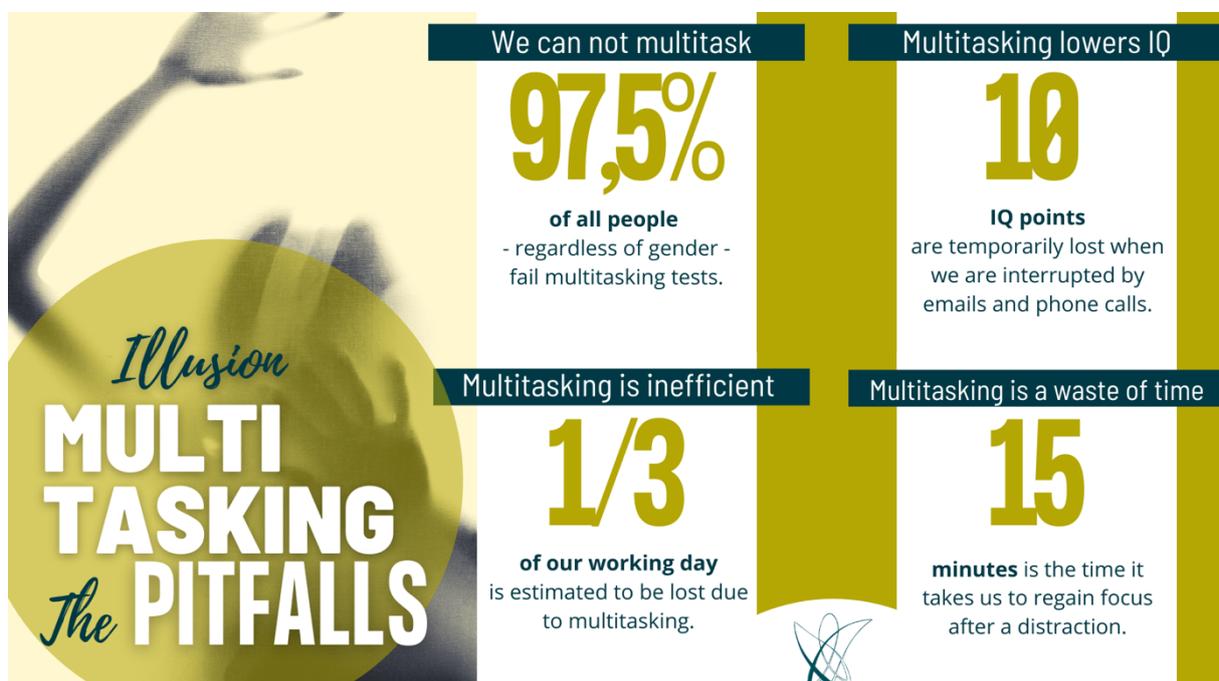


LET'S SINGLETASK!

HOW THE MYTH OF MULTITASKING ROBBS US OF TIME AND ENERGY EVERY DAY

In Michael Ende's book, Momo, there exists the fantastical characters The Grey Gentlemen. They are tasked with stealing people's time, slowly draining them of life. We'd like to steal that analogy for multitasking. Multitasking slowly robs us of our time, wasting away what might have been a productive day. In this article, we hope to finally put to rest the myth of multitasking. The truth is people are simply not capable of focusing on more than one task at a time.

Contrary to some expectations, the ability to multitask has very little to do with our gender. The human brain is simply not equipped for it. It has always been said that women are born with the ability to do countless things at the same time. Like a Hindu goddess with a hundred arms - they write emails, make phone calls, rock their children to sleep, and prepare lunch with a wooden spoon. However, this belief in the multitasking-woman harms us more than it helps us, because it puts women under pressure to perform the impossible. For people of all genders, multitasking does not lead to the desired goal. It doesn't save time, nor is it effective. On the contrary, it costs us time every day, causing unnecessary stress and reducing our thinking power and mental health.



Do you see yourself as living proof of successful multitasking?

Then try this: Memorize the following numbers - 27, 4, 13, and 1 - and simultaneously write an email to a business partner. You will most likely have one of two problems: either you don't manage to write the email because your mind is stuck on memorizing the numbers or you forget the numbers but write an okay email. If you found yourself achieving one of these results, don't worry, you're in

good company. Different multitasking tests conducted on a host of different individuals have all come to the same conclusion: multitasking doesn't work.

The German Institute for Work and Health, for example, conducted tests with men and women of different age groups. Participants were tasked with typing a phone number into a cell phone while simultaneously doing another task such as driving, retrieving a tissue from a box, grabbing counted money from a wallet, or reading directions. Both men and women failed these tasks at equal rates. We are not computers capable of handling long strings of variables simultaneously. It is impossible for humans to handle more than one complex task without error.

Studies by psychologist David Strayer concluded that a total of 97.5 percent of people fail multitasking tests. Furthermore, they found that attempts to improve one's multi-tasking ability have very little benefit. Further research by Stanford University even found that chronic multitaskers consistently achieve worse scores on aptitude tests than the occasional multitasker.

The reason for this: our short-term memory can only store between five and nine things at any given time. When we try to accomplish two different jobs at the same time, both of which require a certain level of concentration, we fail because our brain can't concurrently store various different and complex sources of information into short-term memory without error. And if things are not stored in the short-term memory, they cannot be transferred to the long-term memory and are therefore not re-accessible at a later date.

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE HOME OFFICE

When you try to write an email during a conference call, a switch flips in your brain. From the phone call to the email, from the email to the phone call, losing both information and time. Sometimes you focus on the email, then on the phone call - but you can't focus on both at the same time. Ultimately, both the quality of the email and the phone call will suffer. The email will most likely contain errors and you will have memory lapses about the content of the conference. Many of my clients argue that just being present during conference calls is enough, and therefore they can certainly write important emails during them. I reply: If the email is really important, doesn't it deserve our full attention? And we should not forget that if we are asked to attend a meeting - and presumably paid to do so - it also deserves our full and undivided attention.

The idea of multitasking often goes hand-in-hand with the mistaken belief that all tasks are equally important and therefore ought to be completed equally quickly. We try to pack more into the day than is possible instead of focusing on what is most important. Switching back and forth between tasks, our brain subconsciously chooses which information to process and which to ignore. If we are listening to something, our visual cortex will be less active. So if you're on the phone and working on your computer at the same time, you'll inevitably absorb less of what's being said in the conversation.

Clifford Nass, the late Stanford University professor, summed it up beautifully when he said,

"Multitaskers are terrible at every single aspect of multitasking. They're terrible at ignoring irrelevant information, they're terrible at keeping information nice and neatly organized in their heads, and they're terrible at switching from one task to the next."

AN EXCEPTION PROVES THE RULE

All those who still think they can multitask successfully may be thinking of some great exception. Yes, it is possible to do two things at once. BUT one of the two activities must be running in a state of autonomous control, not requiring active attention. For example, while driving a car - an activity that with years of experience becomes autonomous - we can follow a podcast and take in much of what was said. However, if we drive a route that is new to us or in dangerous weather, we are forced to focus actively on the task. If in such a situation we try to listen to a podcast, considerably less of what we hear will stick.

WHAT NEUROSCIENCE SAYS

- Research shows that rapidly switching back and forth between two or more tasks lowers our productivity by 40%. We end up accomplishing less, missing (important) information, and making more mistakes that take extra time to correct later.
- We need an average of 15 minutes to regain full focus on our main task after a distraction such as an email.
- Other studies have found that working people who are repeatedly interrupted in their tasks by emails and phone calls temporarily lose as much as 10 IQ points.
- If we take multitasking to the extreme and keep working on multiple things at the same time, it doesn't do our health any good either. Chronic multitaskers face higher levels of stress, anxiety, and cortisol (the fight or flight hormone) production.
- Last but not least, our long-term memory and creativity are damaged. For some consistent multitaskers, the constant switching causes a dopamine rush and leads to a lower density of gray matter in our brain, which is responsible for a long-term drop in efficiency.

So the fact is we suffer from a multitasking paradox: Instead of productivity, multitasking only creates an illusion of productivity.

INTERRUPTED WORKFLOW



FOCUSED WORKFLOW



This graphic above is an impressive illustration of how much time we lose through interrupted and therefore unfocused work. Researchers estimate that we lose around one third of our working day by switching between different tasks in a semi-focused manner. Calculated over the course of a workweek, that's one and a half work days that we could have used productively if a focused methodology was applied.

We must move away from multitasking to prioritization. But this is easier said than done. Technological advances keep tripping us up when it comes to prioritizing. We have to contend with more distractions than ever. And every time we get distracted, our brains have to refocus. The more complex the tasks, the longer it takes to recover from the sudden change.

THE SOCIAL DILEMMA

Our brains are wired to respond strongly to social messages, whether they are verbal or nonverbal. We are geared to be concerned with our status within a group and compelled to interact socially. Information that satisfies this need thus has our full attention. New technologies are both a blessing and a curse in this respect. We are constantly available, called upon, and bombarded with emails and text messages. Our social media channels feed us with info from our social environment. It's hard to simply put the notifications on mute or turn off our devices altogether, especially now that they are so integrated into our workflow. We get lost. On social media channels, and on the internet, focus is thrown out the window.

6 STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL SINGLE-TASKING

We won't be able to reverse technological advances. But we can adopt certain strategies to help us avoid losing focus all the time. Here are six steps to improving your ability to single-task:

Step 1: Create calm before the storm



Take time for silence before each task. It doesn't have to be long. One to three minutes is quite enough. And by silence, I mean complete stillness. Meditate on what you wish to engage with and reflect on potential distractions. That's how we really focus in on the subject of our work. This is how we show appreciation for the task and the here-and-now. Thus, every one of my coaching sessions starts with a ritual of silence.

Step 2: Make a decision about what is really important

The most important skill for staying efficient and productive is prioritizing tasks. This goes hand in hand with saying goodbye to things that cost us too much time and energy while providing little benefit. Use the Pareto Rule, which I hold in high regard. According to this rule, 20% of your activities result in 80% of your success, just as 20% of your customers result in 80% of your revenue. So be selective in your choice of actions, but consistent in your implementation.



The following 2x2 matrix, which I personally like to use, is in the same vein. Check all your tasks for feasibility and usefulness and decide accordingly what should be tackled immediately, later, with help, or not at all.



CHECK YOUR TASKS

PRIORITIZING MADE EASY

2X2MATRIX

Check all your tasks for feasibility and usefulness and decide accordingly what should be tackled immediately, later, with help or not at all.



Step 3: Do the most important thing first

You probably already know this, but we often like to put off things that are most important because they also cost us the most energy and time. Instead, we deal with tasks that are easy to do, that don't require much effort (checking emails, responding to texts, reading the news). But we must break away from this cycle. **Always do the most important thing first.** Not what comes easiest. Create a focused time slot - for example in the morning from 10-12 o'clock - in which you always do the most important task of the day. This creates immense relief and the rest of the day will flow without the nagging of a guilty conscience.

Step 4: Say NO and write a Don't Do list

One of my favorite beliefs is: every no to the world is a yes to myself. This simple motto is a powerful prioritization tool. Only when we manage to say no to things that are less important to us can we fully focus on what really matters. Write a daily **Don't Do List** with all the things you commit to not invest time into. In the evening, check off what you were able to avoid doing and congratulate yourself on creating boundaries with your time.

Step 5: Schedule daily alone time

Block out some time for yourself each day to set your priorities, to meditate on your goals, and plan out how to make them happen. In this way, you can reset your focus and allocate your skills accordingly. We are often surrounded by people all day long resulting in a never-ending stream of conversations and stimuli that distracts us from our real work. If we never have time to ourselves, it can be difficult to filter out irrelevant information and focus on what is really important. Such distractions in turn lead us to unnecessary multitasking and wasted time. This applies to both our personal and professional lives. Which is why it's important to schedule time for ourselves on a regular basis.

Step 6: Tighten up your time, increase urgency, enjoy your impatience.

We should take advantage of our inherent impatience when working, says author and leadership expert Peter Bregman. "Create unrealistically short deadlines," Bregman writes for Harvard Business Review. "Cut all your meetings in half. Give yourself one-third of the time you think you need to accomplish something." Because, the more time we have, the

more opportunity we have to put things off. We all know that when we're pressed for time, we can activate almost unbelievable potential. Use this power. We also know by now that our attention drops after an average of 18 minutes. Accordingly, it also makes sense to move on to a new task after your attention begins to wane and to give the next task our full concentration.

So let's finally bury the myth about multitasking and start to become wonderfully efficient single-taskers. Because in the desperate attempt to do a thousand things, with a hundred arms, we will only trip over our excessive limbs and fail to properly exploit our full potential. The secret of our success lies in prioritizing and focusing. Everything else only robs us of our time.

**EVERY PERSON HAS HIS TIME.
AND ONLY AS LONG AS IT IS REALLY HIS, IT REMAINS ALIVE.**

Momo

You should definitely watch/listen to this

The Bible on Singletasking

The One Thing: The surprisingly simple truth about extraordinary success. By Gary Keller and Jay Paspasan.

Podcast

The One Thing. www.the1thing.com

Further reading

The 4-hour work week: more time, more money, more life, By Timothy Ferriss.

Harvard Business Review: Manage your Energy, not your Time. By Tony Schwartz and Catherine McCarthy.

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Videos

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