

How Multitasking Erodes Productivity and Dings Your IQ



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If you've heard of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), you probably know that its [symptoms](#) include impulsivity, difficulty focusing, poor time management, problems prioritizing, and short attention span. And it's taxing for those who struggle to overcome it.



In the workplace, something quite similar and widespread plagues companies, and it wears the innocent label of multitasking. Although it purports to increase efficiency, in most cases, multitasking merely increases busyness while eroding productivity. (A better name might be "multitasking.") It is the business equivalent of leaving a runner on second at the end of an inning — every inning. Baseball teams aren't productive because they engage in feverish activity; they're productive because they focus on bringing the runner home. Leaders need to make sure their companies do the same.

What is multitasking?

Multitasking is admittedly a loaded term, so for the purpose of this column, I'll limit its meaning to the act of undertaking more than one task at the same time (or during the same work session) in the name of super-efficiency.

For example, one might be talking with a customer by phone while completing a form for a regulatory body on a computer and scanning receipts to be submitted with an expense report. Or at another level, one might attend a meeting while making notes for a PowerPoint presentation on a laptop and fielding incoming texts from coworkers on a smartphone.

All that activity provides the sensation of accomplishment when, in fact, it is unproductive. Multitasking causes employees to pay partial attention to multiple items simultaneously. That results in incomplete understanding, inaccurate or patchy responses to messages or requests (and therefore additional follow-up messages), or things slipping through the cracks.

And "since I'm multitasking anyway," one might rationalize, "let me just check my social media accounts," a further distraction.

So, leaders need to pay attention to multitasking in their organizations because:

- It's terrible for business. Rather than aid productivity, multitasking hamstrings it by as much as [40%](#).

- It's trying for employees. Multitasking increases stress while reducing achievement and meaningfulness.
- It's treacherous for brains. Multitasking impairs cognitive ability and [lowers IQ](#).

And yet, job listings continue to require multitasking as a necessary skill, and applicants often boast of it in cover letters. Here's an actual job posting from a few days ago for a medical data handler, where errors can cause significant problems for patients as well as lots of financial confusion: *"The ideal candidate is ... able to multi-task, with a high degree of quality and accuracy while complying with all regulatory and company standards."*

Kidding, right?

The taste for multitasking in the workplace was fueled initially by the torrent of data that began to flow into our daily work lives. It started as a desperate attempt to keep up with hundreds of emails, texts, intra-company chat lines, and whatever report our boss needs in 20 minutes. We have continued to fight back by responding instantly to every demand until a map of our workday organization now resembles a plate of spaghetti. Something or someone is continually interrupting our train of thought and derailing whatever had been our avowed purpose for the day.

All these interruptions would have fit neatly into what Ralph Waldo Emerson called "emphatic trifles."

True, some tools have been developed to help with this, but multitasking is still, if not an actual disease, certainly tantamount to an ADHD-like ailment in its effect on the business landscape.

The Myth of Multitasking

It's magical thinking to believe that one person who multitasks can do the work of two or three who don't, or that because of a multitasker's instant responsiveness, they are in control of their situation. Neither is the case.

That's because, although most of us don't realize it, we each have a [limited supply of attention](#) each day. It is currency — and I contend precious currency — as proven by everyone's desire to have yours. Like any other currency, it needs to be carefully guarded, budgeted, and invested.

But let's say you buy into the multitasking myth. If so, your plan for the workday might be to toil away all morning to clear your desk of all the distracting "small stuff" so that you can finally devote your attention to the Big Project later this afternoon.

Don't bet the rent money on that outcome. Why? Because every time you switch tasks, you lose a little bit of your power to focus that day. So, if you clear out your inbox, answer a dozen texts, return six calls, make upcoming travel reservations, tend to your Slack channels, and complete a peer review before settling in to figure out a strategy for new market expansion, you'll have spent your wad of attention without using it to pay for what matters most. And you probably won't understand why your brain can't focus on the remaining important task productively. You might even conclude, erroneously, that quiet time doesn't work for you.

If you've ever had an amazing insight about a project in the shower, only to forget it mid-way through a hectic day, this is why. I call it attention fatigue, and it's a direct result of multitasking.

Why multitasking won't disappear entirely

Despite all this, the world is moving very fast, and business continues to accelerate with it. With all of our devices and channels, distractions will surround us as a regular part of life. We're even attracted to these overwhelming distractions because they stimulate an ancient bit of wiring in our brains, which is how the modern assault of messages and interruptions have become the clickbait of our professional lives.

Eons ago, in our past lives as cave-dwellers and hunter-gatherers, the stimulus of distraction helped us stay alive. A rustle or a scent could mean a meal was nearby, or danger was at hand. When we responded to these stimuli by catching food or avoiding trouble, our brains rewarded us with what, for simplicity's sake, we'll call a little drop of dopamine happiness. Today, whenever we act on any of the limitless items in a constant stream of distractions, it triggers the same response. Handle a swarm of texts, drip. Respond to a flock of emails in your inbox, drip, drip. Check off an ambush of minor miscellany that landed on your to-do list, drip, drip, drip. That's part of why multitasking is a hard habit to shake.

Yet, leaders need to know that, like all limiting habits and addictions, it's worth overcoming. The first step, of course, is recognizing the problem. For example, after discussing this topic for a while, one of my associates arrived at this personal definition of multitasking: "The cover of busyness I use to hide from the harder, scarier stuff that real achievement requires."

Why you aren't built to multi-task

In primitive times, the brain's stimulus-response incentive was a survival tool, so occasional activation made sense. But today, when multitasking triggers multiple responses every hour, there is an imbalance. The brain pays a toll every time it switches attention from one thing to another; doing so uses up brain cells and slows the response to each operation we try to perform.

Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN's chief medical correspondent, says that it's not only the amount of time it takes for someone to switch from one part of the brain to another when they multitask; **the bandwidth** matters, too. You are starting a new task while maintaining a level of alertness to the other two or three things on your plate. While your brain is deciding when to shift between them, it must also find where it left off before the last switch, and then reassemble the surrounding contextual elements for the task to which you have just returned. The [American Psychological Association](#) reports that this slows productivity, and the more complicated or unfamiliar the work is, the longer it takes the brain to make these adjustments.

Seth Godin (not a medical doctor, but someone who understands productivity) recommends resisting this drain on mental bandwidth by simply not being available when people ask, "Have you got three minutes?" In his view, multitasking is what prevents getting to, or finishing, the most important things. He ascribes this diminished productivity to what former Microsoft executive Linda Stone termed as "**continuous partial attention**."

In Summary

The frenzied pursuit of responding to everything immediately leads to multitasking, which sounds like a productive idea but instead taxes your brain and leaves you too mentally and emotionally fatigued to take on serious matters that require concentrated attention. Our brains are not wired for sustained multitasking, and our businesses are paying far too high a price in lost productivity.

So, our role as leaders and managers must include minimizing this scattershot approach to task completion and instead applying our innate human strengths in a more focused way. It's the only direction our companies and our people can take to be more successful and productive in an age of distraction.

I'll say more about the cost and cure of multitasking in my next column.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/curtsteinhorst/2020/02/20/how-multitasking-erodes-productivity-and-dings-your-iq/?ss=leadership-strategy>