

The Myth of Multitasking

Multitasking is the biggest myth of modern times. We are all addicted to being busy and talking about how much we have to do. Furthermore, we fool ourselves into thinking we can do more than one thing at a time and do them all well.

We can't. Multitasking has never been and will never be a real thing. We just think we should be able to do it because the expectation is that we, as Americans, should get the most out of every minute. We take pride in how packed our schedules are. But study after study has shown that our commitment to the idea of multitasking is hurting us rather than helping us.

Task Switching

It turns out what we are really doing is task switching. The human brain can't **actually** think about two things simultaneously. Instead, when we force it to, the brain simulates working on multiple tasks at once by going from one task to another and another in rapid sequence.

With all that brainpower buzzing we feel like we are being really productive, but it is a fallacy brought on by the endorphins and adrenaline that multitasking brings about. We often become addicted to these brain chemicals, and continue to seek them out to get this buzz- but that's another topic for a different day. If we were to measure what actually gets accomplished, we would be shocked that we were further behind than ever.

Why does task switching slow us down? Because it takes a period of time to readjust to the next task. No matter how quickly we think we are producing, if we stop doing one task and change to another, it can take anywhere from seconds to minutes to get back up to speed.

A study by Gloria Mark at the University of California Irvine* shows it can take as much as 25 minutes to continue a task after interruption. Think about how many times you face daily interruptions. Now think about how that adds up over the span of a week. You can see how interruption recovery time really threatens your productivity.

Focus on One Thing At a Time

Instead of trying to do it all at once, prioritize the work you need to accomplish. Select a first task and set a short time limit. Focus on only that task until it is complete, and then move onto the next. You may catch yourself breathing a sigh of both relief and accomplishment. That first thing is done. You don't have to worry about it anymore.

Focusing on completing one task at a time means our brain is humming along a single path with no break in momentum. Instead of working on several things for an hour, try

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breaking it into 15 minute increments with a single task planned for each one. You'll get more done, and feel far less stressed.

Give Yourself a Break

As entrepreneurs, we feel the need to go faster and faster to build our businesses. There is more to get done than there are hours in the day. One way that you can help yourself get in the habit of doing one thing at a time is to give yourself short breaks.

- Take some time to let go of the previous task and let your mind and body relax for a moment.
- Gaze out the window.
- Lean back and close your eyes.
- Stand up and stretch.
- Just let yourself go for a bit before diving into the next task.

You will be surprised at how much more you get accomplished without becoming exhausted.

Trying to do two things at once won't save you time; in fact, it will create a longer day with lower quality work and more mistakes. Choose one task, do it well, take a quick break and move on. The work will get done with fewer errors and less stress. Try it for an hour today, and enjoy the benefits of single-tasking.

*Mark, G. (2008). The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress. Retrieved 8/12/2015 from <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1357072>.