Surprise: Very few people can actually multitask!

Those who can are the rare exception. Most people who think they are multitasking are actually just shifting their attention rapidly from one thing to another, giving them the impression they are able to do two or more things at the same time.

**For the vast majority of people, performing two effortful tasks at once makes them do worse at both tasks.** They would be better off doing each task separately. A 2010 University of Utah study investigated what happens to participants’ driving ability when they attempt to do other things while driving (in this case, memorize words and solve math problems). Researchers found that 97.5% of the 200 participants showed a significant decrease in both their driving abilities and memory skills when multitasking. What surprised researchers was that there was a handful of individuals (2.5%) who showed no decline in their performance, a few of whom actually showed improved performance when the tasks were combined. Researchers dubbed this small number of participants “supertaskers.” More research is needed: will those participants always be able to do well when performing the two tasks at once? What about tasks other than the ones used in the study? (Before you conclude that you’re among the elite supertaskers, keep in mind that most people overestimate their abilities in many areas. Moreover, the less capable the person is, the more he or she tends to overestimate the ability. This is known Dunning-Kruger effect.)

**For most of us, multitasking is inefficient and stressful to the brain.** Constantly shifting your attention hurts your concentration and slows learning. Your productivity decreases when you constantly interrupt yourself by switching from task to task. You fragment your attention. You lose time. In *The New York Times* bestseller *Brain Rules* (Pear Press, 2009), John Medina has this to say about multitasking: “Studies show that a person who is interrupted takes 50 percent longer to accomplish a task. Not only that, he or she makes 50 percent more errors.” This is especially true when the tasks are unfamiliar ones. (Dr. Medina is a medical school professor and the director of the Brain Center for Applied Learning Research at Seattle Pacific University.)

**Even though you may try to do several things at once, the brain does not like it and does not get used to it.** Research on university students’ media multitasking revealed that heavy multitaskers were less competent at doing several things at once than light multitaskers. (In the study, media included such things as print media, television, computer-based videos, such as YouTube, music, video games, email, texting, cell phone use, web surfing, and other computer-based applications, such as word processing. Students in the study were using these in various combinations.) As the study indicates, spending time
multitasking does not make you better at it—in fact, it’s just the opposite. The bottom line: Don’t fragment your attention by trying to do two things at once. Don’t try to study in places where there are endless distractions. Don’t interrupt studying with texting, tweets, or phone calls. Turn off the TV and the iPod. You’ll shorten your study time. You’ll increase your concentration and effectiveness.

Statistics on accidents and deaths caused by drivers using cell phones provide graphic evidence of the brain’s inability to multitask. “Driving distracted” is as dangerous as driving drunk. Don’t put yourself and others at unnecessary risk by asking your brain to do what it cannot do.

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