



Three Reasons Multitasking is a Huge Waste of Time – And How to Stop Doing it

Systems of Work

By Jean Chatzky

Think about the last time you tried doing several things at once. Was it this morning, when you were answering emails while working on a report for work? Perhaps talking on the phone while driving to pick up your kid? Maybe you're simultaneously making your to-do list while you're reading this article? Even if you thought you were being efficient at the time, research suggests juggling two (or more) tasks usually means somewhat neglecting all of them. *"I think it's a huge waste of time,"* says Karen Finerman of *CNBC's Fast Money*, who was recently featured on my new podcast, *HerMoney* with Jean Chatzky. *"The more you switch, the more you backtrack — the more time you've wasted."*

"When people multitask, often they do multiple things badly," says David Sanbonmatsu, a professor of psychology at the University of Utah. *"A lot of times, the people who multitask the most are the worst at it... it's individuals who lack impulse control."*

But don't be too hard on yourself. The urge to multitasking is genetic, explains Earl Miller, professor of neuroscience at the Picower Institute at MIT. Our brains evolved in a very different environment from the Information Age we're currently living in. It used to be that hearing a rustle in the bushes could lead to either danger or a potential food source, so it made sense to break focus on a current task in favour of seeking new information.

Here are three reasons multitasking is a huge waste of time — and one way to stop for good.

You're less productive and effective.

When you multitask, what you're actually doing is trying to switch back and forth between multiple attention-demanding tasks. Every switch requires the brain to re-orient or re-familiarize itself with the task at hand — and that takes up a lot of time that could be spent working.

You sabotage your ability to do good work.

“When people multitask, they tend to perform the primary or most important task less well,” says Sanbonmatsu. More troubling, we're less aware that we're sacrificing quality because we spend so much time toggling that we're less able to monitor ourselves. In other words: “[Multitaskers are] less aware of what they're doing right and what they're doing badly.” As for those folks who brag about how great they are at doing a few things at once? They're pulling the wool over their own eyes. “They tend to be overconfident because they're less aware of how multitasking is impairing their performance,” Sanbonmatsu says. Ouch.

You squelch your creative juices.

Multitasking even hinders imagination, experts say. Key thoughts and creativity come from links between memories, says Miller, and using time and brainpower to constantly switch back and forth between two tasks doesn't allow one thought to lead to another. “You get truly deep and clear thoughts when you follow the garden path of this network to new and clear places,” he says. (Thus, explaining why, you have your best, most creative thoughts while you're in the shower or out for a run.)

So, What's The Solution?

If you're ready to stop doing everything from texting while walking (thank you!) to writing a report while on a conference call, the best way to do it is to remove the temptation. "Our brains are ill-equipped for the information rich environment we're now in," says Miller. So, plan a time to focus on one thing — maybe even schedule it in your calendar — and put the cell phone, tablet or anything else that distracts you in another room. Try to prevent interruptions by silencing your phone or closing the door, and surround yourself with only the task at hand. Or use a tool like Freedom.to, which blocks distracting apps and websites from tempting you for the time period you tell it to. From there, try to finish every task to completion — you'll get a boost in motivation from checking one item off your to-do list and moving on to the next.