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The Multitasking Mirage

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Podcast Transcript

Are you doing more than one thing right now? Are you listening to me at this moment while engaging in other activities such as checking your email, texting a colleague, surfing the web on your phone, working on a report, or playing a computer game? Do you feel like you're more productive when working on two or more assignments at the same time? Is simultaneously juggling multiple tasks a necessary evil in our fast-paced, modern workplaces where our responsibilities are numerous and our connection to technology is constant?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you're probably a multitasker. You may even think of your ability to multitask as a key strength or a special talent. But before you congratulate yourself for your amazing ability to multitask and get things done, be warned. There is a growing body of research that shows that multitasking actually *decreases* productivity, impairs your cognitive ability, increases your stress, and diminishes your creativity. All of these things make you *less* effective and reduce you to a fraction of the professional you're capable of being.

In this podcast, I'll define multitasking and explain what happens in the human brain when attempting to do it. I'll also review what the research says about the dangers of multitasking and highlight some more effective strategies for tackling your lengthy to-do list.

[*Music transition*]

Focusing on more than one assignment at a time, repeatedly switching back and forth between two or more activities, or performing a number of unrelated tasks in rapid succession can all be considered "multitasking." The problem is that our minds are not wired for this type of overload.

The performance of the human brain breaks down when it attempts to engage in two tasks that require conscious thought at the same time. Granted, there are *some* things you can do simultaneously without a difference in performance. You *can* walk and chew gum at the same time. You can fold laundry and sing along to your favorite songs on the radio. You can do chores around the house while carrying on a conversation. The reason we can pair these types of activities is because one or both don't require much thinking. Walking, eating, and cleaning are examples of motor skills you have learned to put on autopilot. However, if you pair two activities that require conscious thought—like responding to emails while attempting to pay attention during a meeting—your performance on both tasks will suffer.

According to researchers Meyer, Evans, and Rubinstein, here's what happens in your brain when you try to engage in two cognitive tasks at once. Your cerebral cortex manages what are called "executive controls." These controls organize the way your brain processes tasks. There are two stages:

- Stage one is called goal shifting. This is what happens when you shift your focus from one activity to another.

- The second stage is rule activation. When your brain shifts to the new activity, it has to deactivate the rules of the previous activity and then turn on the rules for the new task.

Therefore when you engage in multitasking, you're not actually thinking about both tasks at the same time. Instead you're engaging in "switchtasking." You're switching back and forth between two activities and forcing your brain to shift focus repeatedly and turn rules on and off in a rapid-fire fashion. Constantly having to focus and re-focus ultimately drains your time and energy, which impacts your overall performance.

Here's an interesting experiment to try if you still feel like you can perform two thinking tasks at once and experience no performance issues.

Activity #1

Grab a stopwatch and open Microsoft Word. Start the timer and then type your first and last name. Beneath your name, type a number for each letter in your name (1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) Stop the timer and record your time. In my case, this means I would type "Scott Blades" on the first line and then type "1234567891011" beneath it. My time for this activity? Nine seconds.

Activity #2

Rather than type your name first and then type the numbers second, try to do both at the same time. On the first line, type the first letter of your name. Then type 1 on the second line. Next type the second letter of your name on the first line, 2 beneath it, and so forth. When I tried doing both of these simple cognitive tasks simultaneously, it took me [drum roll] 51 seconds! That's more than 5 times longer than when I did the tasks separately and back to back.

Do you think you can do both activities in the same amount of time? Hit the pause button and give it a try. I'm guessing you'll find it's easier and less time consuming to do one thing at a time.

[Music transition]

The literature on multitasking is loaded with case studies and startling statistics demonstrating how this type of work style makes you less effective. According to the research, decreased productivity, impaired cognitive ability, increased stress, and diminished creativity are all side effects of multitasking.

Decreased Productivity

A 2001 study by Joshua Rubinstein, Jeffrey Evans, and David Meyer suggests that people can reduce their productivity by as much as 40 percent by the mental blocks that result from repeatedly switching tasks. Participants lost significant amounts of time as they switched between multiple activities and lost even more time as the tasks became increasingly complex.

Impaired Cognitive Ability

In his 2008 book, *Brain Rules*, John Medina reports that multitaskers not only take 50% longer to accomplish a single task but they also make up to 50% more errors.

In a 2009 study, Stanford researcher Clifford Nass challenged 262 college students to complete experiments that involved switching among tasks, filtering irrelevant information, and using working memory. Nass and his colleagues were convinced that the frequent multitaskers would outperform their non-multitasking peers in at least some of the categories. Much to their surprise, they found the opposite.

Chronic multitaskers were dreadful at all three activities. Nass and his team discovered that people who frequently multitask—and perceive this as a strength—were actually *worse* at multitasking than those who like to do one thing at a time. Their inferior performance was because they had more trouble organizing their thinking and filtering out irrelevant information. They were also *slower* at switching from one task to another.

According to a 2009 study from Western Washington University, people who are busy doing two things at once don't even see noticeable things right in front of them. In this case, the researchers asked a clown to ride around on a

unicycle in a campus square. Seventy five percent of college students who walked across this square while talking on their cell phones did not even notice the clown. The researchers call this “inattentive blindness.” In other words, the cell-phone talkers were technically looking at their surroundings, but their brains weren’t processing the information around them.

A research study from the University of London suggests that multitasking effects your brain much like smoking marijuana or going without sleep for a night. Participants who multitasked during cognitive tasks dropped as many as 15 IQ points and fell to the average range of an 8-year-old child.

Increased Stress

Multitasking has also been tied to higher stress levels. Gloria Mark and Stephen Vaida of the University of California measured the heart rates of employees with and without continuous access to work-related email. They found that employees who were constantly connected to email stayed in a perpetual “high alert” mode and experienced higher heart rates. Those without the constant stream of emails did less multitasking and were less stressed as a result.

Diminished Creativity

According to a 2010 research study from the University of Chicago, multitasking requires a lot of “working memory” or temporary brain storage. If our brains are on overload, we diminish our capacity to daydream and generate imaginative ideas. This in turn degrades our performance as creative problem solvers.

[*Music transition*]

As modern-day professionals, we can easily fall into the trap of a multitasking work style. We have numerous responsibilities. Our calendars are packed. The phone calls keep coming and emails flow to our inboxes in a steady stream. In this type of environment—where making progress on several fronts is a reality, steering clear of multitasking requires us to implement deliberate systems and habits to increase our productivity and effectiveness. Here are a few strategies for your consideration.

1. Set Clear Priorities

A guaranteed way for becoming overwhelmed and ineffective is to take on too much work and view all of your tasks as equal priorities. Work with your supervisor or a trusted colleague to help you determine what needs your focus now, what can wait, and what you can release altogether. Do you have any activities that drain your time and energy and offer little return on your investment? What are some obligations that you could set free without any long-term, negative consequences? By responsibly reducing the number of things you need to do in a day, you can decrease your need to multitask and—as a result—accomplish more. Stephen Covey refers to this type of prioritizing as learning to say “no” to protect the time you’ll need for your bigger burning “yes.”

2. Chunking

Rather than constantly switching back and forth between multiple activities every few seconds or every other minute, set aside chunks of time to focus on a specific task or a group of related tasks. Clifford Nass suggests following a 20-minute rule at minimum. An example of this would be to set aside 20 minutes to pay all of your bills at once rather than pay each one separately as you receive it. Or maybe you set aside an hour to work on that key report you need to present at next week’s meeting. Focusing on a task for 20 minutes at a time or longer will allow you to get into the zone of whatever you’re doing and make progress. Focused effort during *chunks* of time also eliminates the extra energy it takes to shuffle back and forth between too many things. Consider your responsibilities and identify the types of things you can “batch process.” Block off these chunks of time on your calendar and hold yourself accountable for getting focused and getting *finished*.

3. Enter a Lockdown State

When necessary, give yourself permission to focus on a single task for a more extended period of time like a full morning, afternoon, or even most of a day. Be sure to have your bases covered before doing this. For example, you may need to discuss your strategy with your supervisor and colleagues to work out phone and email coverage. Entering this type of temporary lockdown state will allow you to get laser-beam focused on a single task and make significant headway. If you can’t go the whole day without checking your email and phone messages, consider doing

these activities in 2-4 batches *throughout* the day. As discussed in the previous section, chunking these types of tasks is a more effective way to work anyway.

4. Minimize distractions in your workspace

Does your email client issue sound alerts when you receive messages? You might consider muting your computer to avoid these distractions. Another strategy is to customize your sound alerts for your leadership and key customers who might demand a more immediate response.

Does your email client tempt you to click on every message by displaying a popup window on your screen? This feature can be disabled so you're not constantly distracted by a constant stream of emails (many of which you probably don't need to read anyway).

Does your smartphone have a bunch of chirps, chimes, and ringtones for every notification you receive from your apps? The research shows that the average person checks his or her phone 150 times a day. Unless you need to rely on your smartphone to do your job, you should consider minimizing or disabling the distracting notifications you receive or keeping your phone on mute.

5. Watch that Open Door Policy

To maintain professional relationships, it's important to be available to others. Having an open door policy is a great way to establish that you're approachable and collaborative. But be careful what that open door communicates. Are you really 100 percent available to everyone all of the time? A poorly managed open door policy can lead to constant interruptions and pull you into a switchtasking mode. Business research suggests that the average interruption takes anywhere from 2 to 15 minutes of recovery time. This is about how long it takes you to reorient yourself to what you were working on before the interruption.

If you need to avoid any interruptions for a stretch, shoot an email to your team or put up a friendly "do not disturb" sign on your office door or cubicle entry way. Scheduling regular check-ins with your supervisor, direct reports, and key customers is also a great way to prevent interruptions. By having regular meetings on your calendar, your colleagues will be more likely to hold off on engaging you until your scheduled time together. They'll have less of a need to interrupt you throughout the week and instead bring a list of questions or agenda items to your meeting.

[*Music transition*]

The next time you find yourself multitasking remember what the research reports:

- You are slowing yourself down.
- You are hurting your brain in a way that is similar to smoking marijuana or going without sleep for a night.
- You are going to make up to 50% more errors.
- You are stressing yourself out.
- And you are killing your chances of coming up with creative ideas.

Multitasking is a myth—a mirage of productivity in the modern-day workplace. There is a better way to work. By setting priorities, chunking your time, engaging in focused work sessions, avoiding distractions, and minimizing interruptions, you can elevate your performance and put yourself on the path to greater productivity.

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