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Why monotasking is the new black

Forget multitasking – we need to narrow our focus to become more efficient and stay mentally fit, according to brain expert **Dr. Jenny Brockis**

SURVIVING IN the crazy, busy modern workplace has resulted in our adoption of some new strategies designed to save us time. The problem is that no one appears to have done the necessary checks to see that these actually work. The one strategy most widely adopted has turned out to be the worst performance-enhancing strategy ever, because it requires us to use our brain in ways it wasn't designed for.

Yes, multitasking is the biggest new brain myth on the block. It's time to get rid of it and replace it with a far more efficient method of getting more done – monotasking.

Multitasking is trying to focus on more than one thing at a time. Sure, you can drink a coffee while walking along and talking to a colleague, crossing the road and taking a selfie, but you're not paying focused attention to any one of those things, including your colleague.

One of the reasons multitasking has become so pervasive is because everyone's doing it, and ticking off items on our to-do lists makes us feel good – which adds to the delusion. We know using our mobile phones while driving is dangerous, yet more than 70% of us admit to doing it. We ignore the risk because multitasking has become the 'norm'; it's considered a basic work requirement. We even post job listings that say that multitasking skills are desired.

Multitasking fragments our attention – a quick email response here, a two-minute conversation there. We skim information and only grab the headlines. The outcome? The cognitive cost includes poorer memory, mental fatigue, and reduced efficiency, effectiveness– and innovation. We make more mistakes, and we miss opportunities.

Overall, multitasking puts us at increased risk of burnout, damaged relationships and

poorer performance; it's hardly the time- and energy-saving solution we thought it would be.

What's going on in the brain when we multitask?

One of our brain's primary functions is to keep us safe; we scan our environment every one-fifth of a second on the lookout for changes. The brain loves patterns and things that are familiar, because the implication is that this is a safe place. Our selective focus has developed so we pay attention to what is most important to us at any given moment while being alert to other things happening on the periphery.

When we direct our focused attention, we use part of our prefrontal cortex, the highly specialized part of our frontal lobes used for higher-order executive thoughts such as planning, organizing and regulating emotion. This area has what can only be considered a couple of design flaws: It's small, highly demanding of energy and can only handle a small amount of information at any one time. That's why the number of thoughts we can hold 'front of mind' at any given time is around seven. As the ideas get more complex, the space available reduces. When it comes to focused attention, there is only room for one.

Multitasking is the one brain function that the more we practice, the worse we get. It has been shown that chronic media multitaskers fragment their attention so much that they perform worse even when trying to monotask.

It has been estimated that multitasking causes us to make up to 50% more mistakes and take 50% longer to complete our work, equivalent to roughly a 25% drop in

WHY MULTITASKING FAILS



When we attempt to multitask, our obliging brain attempts to help by giving one task to each hemisphere. The trouble is, the brain can still only pay attention to one at a time, so the brain task switches very, very fast, giving us the illusion that we are paying attention to two things simultaneously. This can be made more obvious when we look at optical illusions.

What do you see in this picture, a native chief or an Inuit?



individual productivity over the course of the day. An innocuous two-minute interruption can translate into 24 minutes before you get back to where you were before your train of thought was broken. No wonder some days we can feel we've gotten nothing done, yet are exhausted.

Multitasking in an organization reduces performance further – for example, when we are kept waiting for a piece of work by a multitasking colleague or need a decision to be made to move forward on a new project, so we end up starting something else.

We cannot multitask even if we are young, if we are female, if we are Clark Kent or if we like wearing our underpants over our trousers. Multitasking is multi-failing unless you happen to be one of the 2% on the planet who are supertaskers and whose performance gets better the more they multitask. (If you haven't undergone the cognitive tests to prove it, your belief in your ability to multitask is most likely delusional – research has shown that those who believe they are really good at multitasking perform the worst overall.)

The way to get rid of multitasking is to stop doing it. But just like giving up any habit, such as smoking, it's not always easy, especially if we are under pressure; the temptation for

the brain is to default to the survival route it thinks works best. Here are four ways to move away from multitasking:

1 Introduce monotasking into the workplace

While we can all try to limit our multitasking tendencies individually, the need is to reduce organizational multitasking, which has to come from the top. Making monotasking the preferred way of doing things gives everyone permission to follow suit.

2 Prioritize your priorities

Take 10 minutes at the end of the working day to determine your top three most important and urgent tasks for the next day, and list them in order of priority. Shove everything else into a holding pen – those items can wait. The next day, start on your top priority first and don't move to the second item until the first is completed.

3 Communicate your priorities

In the office, make sure everyone is on the same page and knows which priorities have been agreed on so that there is no temptation to start on something else. This will boost completion rates.

4 Practice monotasking

Choose one activity, close the office door, switch your phone to silent, avoid all interruptions and work on just that one activity for a specified amount of time.

Monotasking leads to more work being completed more quickly and to a higher standard. Completing our work well feels rewarding, resulting in the brain secreting more dopamine, making us feel good and motivating us to repeat that rewarding activity. Emotions are contagious, so when we are feeling good, others will too, and the working atmosphere becomes more positive and vibrant. Being in a more positive mood opens our mind to more innovative and creative thinking – making it easier to solve more problems and make good decisions.

Working with our brain in the way it was intended is not just a better way of working; it also leads toward creating a high-performance workplace. **WP**

Dr. Jenny Brockis is a medical practitioner, specialist in the science of high-performance thinking and author of Future Brain: The 12 Keys to Create Your High-Performance Brain.

