



The Multitasking Myth

Research now suggests that multitasking isn't the key to maximizing your productivity. So stop what you're doing and pay attention

FEEL AS THOUGH YOU'RE constantly juggling projects and clients? Does your plate overflow with more to-dos than you can possibly get done in a workday? If you're spread thin trying to get everything on your list checked off, you're far from alone. Mark Whitmore, managing partner at Deloitte in Toronto and member of its Canadian executive team, deals with more than 250 emails and goes to about a dozen meetings a day, plus he leads 300 partners and 3,000 professionals. Another busy businessperson, Carlo Sistilli, is CFO with Arista Homes Limited, a homebuilder in the Greater Toronto Area. He heads up

accounting, finance and IT and can receive more than 100 emails daily. Sistilli says, "I have as many as 10 items on my daily to-do list but I'm often sidetracked to deal with problems and special projects as they arise."

Sound familiar? In today's workplace, we have two big problems. The first: we are drinking from a fire hose of info. "We take in five times more information today than we did in 1986," says Daniel Levitin, a neuroscientist at McGill University in Montreal and author of *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*. The second problem? We're spending far too much

time and energy trying to cope with information overload and our growing to-do lists by juggling too many things at a time. Interestingly, a large body of neuroscience finds that when we multitask, we actually accomplish less and can feel really tired and stressed out at the end of the day. Switching back and forth fractures attention and burns up glucose, the fuel that brain cells need to work. "So if after a bunch of switching, you feel like your head has been in a salad spinner, that's why," Levitin says. Multitasking also releases the stress hormone cortisol, which can cause foggy thinking and anxiety and leads to the release of adrenaline — a.k.a. the fight or flight hormone — which is handy in the animal kingdom, but it doesn't have a place in the office. Even worse, brain studies find that multitasking causes

information you want to learn to go to the wrong part of the brain. No wonder we feel like we're falling behind.

What are the best strategies to manage all of your to-dos, stay productive and avoid burnout? Read on to learn key tips and find out how highly productive professionals stay on top of their game.

Break up your day

Levitin writes that even Superman chunks out his day to ensure he can complete his tasks: 1. capture Lex Luthor; 2. dispose of Kryptonite safely; 3. hurl ticking bomb into outer space; 4. pick up clean cape from dry cleaner. Sistilli finds he works better on duties in the morning, so he schedules afternoon meetings. Whitmore also blocks his day, allocating the majority of his time to deal with clients and people and a small amount of time for dealing with communications and internal issues.

Don't jump around

It takes less energy to focus on one duty than it does to switch between projects, but we face two challenges: we are bombarded by alerts and notifications, and the region in the brain that we need to stay on task is easily hijacked by novelty. When we respond to shiny new things, we can be drawn into an addictive loop of short-term rewards and lose out on the opportunity to focus for longer-term rewards. Wendy Woods, a consultant specializing in resiliency, leadership and productivity in Toronto, says, "The challenge with alerts, whether on your smartphone or computer, is that the part of the brain responsible for resisting us from looking at them is weak and gets weaker every time it's used."

Remove the temptation by turning off notifications and phones during blocks of time when you need to focus and then check in a few times a day to triage priorities as required. Sistilli says, "Managing email is the biggest challenge, the most misused productivity tool." He

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needs to be reachable for urgent issues, so he stays signed in and glances at previews. His team knows to indicate "urgent" in the subject line if his immediate attention is required; otherwise he reviews emails just twice a day.

Make technology work for you

Highly productive people are ninjas when it comes to using technology to offload and organize information, freeing up brain capacity to focus on immediate work. Sistilli is already using a tablet for to-do lists, but says he is almost ready to dump his briefcase altogether and use his tablet for all productivity needs. In anticipation of Deloitte's move to an agile environment in its new headquarters later this year — which includes a workplace without offices or assigned seating — Whitmore leverages technology to stay efficient. He has given up his office already and moves around to different workspaces, depending on the nature of the task, by signing in to a cubicle for reviewing documents or taking calls, or to a larger space for meetings. "I have moved to an all-digital, paperless workflow and use a single email address, a single calendar

and take calls through my computer with a headset," says Whitmore.

Take a pause

It turns out that daydreaming isn't actually synonymous with slacking off. In fact, it's beneficial because it gives the brain a break from the task-positive mode. An added bonus: daydreaming and taking a few quiet minutes at your desk are great for boosting creativity.

Breaks don't have to be long to provide benefits. Patricia Katz, a Saskatoon-based productivity and balance strategist who gives talks and offers training seminars, recommends adding a few minutes to step away from your work whenever you can throughout the day, whether that means micropauses for 20 seconds to stand, stretch and look out the window, or longer pauses such as taking a lunch hour away from your screen. "People feel a sense of relief when they learn they actually have permission to pause. When we see the benefits of stepping back to regroup, renew and refresh, it becomes a legitimate use of time and shifts the nature of our internal conversation as well as workplace culture," she says.

Woods recommends rating your attention on a scale of one to 10, where one represents that your mind is elsewhere and 10 is fully present, so you can be aware of how focused you are and make adjustments, if necessary. If your score is not at a seven or higher, you can employ strategies such as simple belly breathing for two minutes to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system — the system that reduces stress — as an effective way to restore focus to keep productive.

You'll find you can get more accomplished and concentrate better if you don't overload your plate with too many things to do at the same time. Even jugglers don't really multitask — they throw some pins into the air so they can focus on one at a time during the critical catch-toss phase, where the actual work happens.

— Jane Langille