Multitasking's Assault on Productivity
Bill Balcezak, Journyx

It is seemingly impossible to avoid multitasking in today's busy world. The constant bombardment of emails, phone calls, and appointments quickly begin to pile up, so to combat this we attempt to juggle more activities at once. I instinctively answer the phone as I'm driving home from work or respond to an urgent email while I'm reading a report, but are these the best solutions to my problems?

Mounting evidence suggests that multitasking is the enemy of productivity. Though it may lead us to think that we're being more productive, we're in fact thwarting performance ability and significantly lowering quality of work along the way. While we can all recognize how multitasking affects the texting driver, the negative impact of multitasking in the workplace is not as immediately apparent.

A 2010 study in the journal *Science* tackled this issue by examining just how the human brain handles multiple simultaneous activities. Research suggests that when a person performs a single task, the goal-oriented areas of both frontal lobes work to engage the task together. When an additional task is added, the two lobes divide responsibility and each hemisphere focuses on its own objective. While our two lobes can work collaboratively to accomplish an independent task, they must divide to accomplish anything more fragmented.[1]

With just two frontal lobes at our disposal, however, humans cannot simultaneously handle more than two unique tasks. When a third task is thrown into the mix, the brain has no choice but to replace one of the initial undertakings.

This means that humans are capable of multitasking to a small degree. That tiny degree, however, is significantly lower than we frequently demand and covers just two fundamental activities. Though it may be possible to read a report and keep track of the time concurrently, one of the initial tasks must be abandoned if further cognitive effort is required. If checking the time leads to thinking about the weekend, for example, then you might as well say goodbye to that report.

We are limited by our own brains, and yet today it seems that people have no choice but to juggle tasks in order to get anything accomplished. So how does multitasking translate into the workplace? In an NPR interview in 2009, Stanford Professor Clifford Nass reported that "multitasking, especially among those who do it the most, is at the very least ineffective and at the worst, harmful."[2] The more a person multitasks, it turns out, the worse they become at focusing on individual tasks. Multitasking not only impedes current productivity, but threatens the individual's ability to perform work in the future as well.

So what can we do to combat this everyday occurrence? Even now you may be reading this article after a few tangential searches, or perhaps you've been checking your Facebook account every few sentences to see if anything new has appeared. Multitasking seems an unavoidable tool in today's busy world, yet its benefits may be nonexistent. Beginning on the next page are a few practices that may help you focus on your work and keep your tasks rolling.

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[1] http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126018694
[2] http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112334449

Break up your Day with Pomodoros

Pomodoro is a schedule-structuring practice consisting of short, uninterrupted increments of work. By working in twenty-five minute increments followed by brief breaks, you experience both undisturbed periods of work and chunks of time dedicated to clearing your mind and pursuing what you wish.

The key to the Pomodoro technique is that, during each Pomodoro, you completely apply yourself to the task at hand. This involves closing the email, putting away the phone, and focusing on nothing but the single task in front of you. Bu putting everything aside, you can really get into the swing of things without constant interruptions derailing your progress.

The added benefit of this approach is that after each short-lived Pomodoro, you can modify your daily schedule based upon the amount of work you've already completed and your expectations for the future. By segmenting your day into numerous Pomodoros, you develop a much clearer image of your time investments for each task.

Timebox your Schedule

Effectively navigating the eight-hour workday is an acquired talent. Endless stretches of time can inspire both fear and lethargy, and it's shockingly easy to walk out the door at the end of the day with little notion of the day's accomplishments.

Before initiating work for the day or starting out on a new project, try writing out what you would like to accomplish and determine a reasonable time estimate for each objective. After you've laid out your expectations, tackle those tasks in uninterrupted chunks of time dedicated toward clearly established goals.

Timeboxing not only helps you work for lengthy, dedicated periods of time, but also keeps you aware of actual time investments toward end objectives. You may discover that you spend three hours every day dealing with emails, or that writing a blog post consumes two hours when it could be cut down to fifteen minutes with limited editing. A better understanding of your own time investments will help you prioritize tasks and get work done.

Planning events before you begin is a great way to make the most of long stretches of time. Armed with a clear image of what needs to be accomplished and the time allotted for each activity, actual productivity will no longer be in jeopardy.

Update your To-Do List

An active to-do list lets you dump ideas into your catalog whenever you think of them. Just remembered that you have to RSVP to a wedding by the end of the week? Don't rush off and put the letter in the mail, just jot it down on your list and mark it according to its priority.

This simple organizational tool will allow you to stay on task without causing you to forget important activities. With just a pad of paper and a pencil, you can maintain your focus and significantly increase productivity. By prioritizing tasks, setting out weekly goals, and adding tasks -- no matter how long or involved they may be -- you can plan for every day and always tackle those tasks that are most pressing or key to later steps. Know your time, know your tasks, and plan accordingly.

Organizing your time may be the best thing you can do for yourself at work, home, and in all aspects of your life. Understand your workload, prioritize tasks, and allow yourself to work without interruption to achieve more without needing to stretch yourself too thin.

Perhaps it is time to take a break from your email for a bit, silence Twitter, and put off watching that YouTube video until you have a free moment. When you're finished with the task at hand, reward yourself by giving these activities the attention they deserve.

About the Author

Bill Balcezak is the general manager of the Time Division for [Journyx](), the first company to provide Web-based time-tracking, project accounting and resource management solutions that guide customers to per-person, per-project profitability. Bill is a seasoned professional with a broad, international and multi-disciplined background in consulting and high technology companies. He has 25+ years of experience in successfully managing heavily integrated, large-scale, critical software deployments for industry leading clients. Bill is a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a Master of Science Degree in Mechanical Engineering. He can be reached at billb@journyx.com.