

Is Multitasking a Myth?

By

Michael J. Farlow, Ph.D.

November, 2010

Those of us who have been head down working hard at our jobs have a sense that we have to be able to multitask or we perish. Most successful people address multiple issues and projects in a sequential fashion during the working day. True multitasking, however, suggests that we do multiple things at the same time. Emphasis on “at the same time”. This usually takes the form of talking on the phone or involved in a meeting while at the same time doing something on the computer (e-mail, Google search, etc.).

The idea of multitasking may have come from the computer world in which multitasking or multiprocessing has long been a preferred method of computer operations. We have probably misinterpreted these words as meaning “at the same time”. However, in programs like Windows, for example, multitasking or multiprocessing is not what the terms imply. Actually the Windows operating system rotates or allocates central processing unit (CPU) time between programs in such a way that several tasks may seem to end or function at the same time. In reality, to obtain true multiprocessing you would have to have two or more CPUs processing each task separately.

Like the computer analogy, your brain has limitations on its processing capability. While certain routine processes (like breathing, temperature control, and even mundane routine tasks like driving to the same work place every day) may take place at the same time as other processes. However, the less mundane and more complex tasks, such as decision making, and analyzing, resist and often balk at doing more than one complex task at the same time. Complex tasks in this case may not seem complex to us, but they demand time from the brain’s equivalent of a computer CPU, the frontal cortex.

The frontal cortex (including the pre-frontal cortex) is what we use to make decisions, choices, and sense out of the barrage of inputs we face every day and every minute of modern life. And, no environment is richer in important issues than in today’s workplace. David Rock in his book *Your Brain at Work*, notes that when you multitask your accuracy goes down. In support of this notion, Christine Rosen in her article *The Myth of Multitasking* (highly recommended reading), agrees with Rock’s literature research suggesting that the end product of multitasking leads to a reduction in IQ of as much as 10 points or an equivalent decrease in IQ of more than twice that of that of marijuana users.

Rosen and others equate these deficits to our ability (or inability) to pay attention. On a daily basis we encounter examples of multitasking gone awry: people driving while talking on a cell phone held to their ear or of locomotive operators texting while pressing tons of deadly iron down a railway at high speed with frequent car crossings. Dr. Harold Pashler in his edited book *Attention*, points out the existence of a bottleneck within the frontal cortex when attempting to conduct more than one task or what he calls dual task interference. Based on current research, Pashler sees no scientific data that counters his

and others research on this topic. The brain, like a CPU, does not process non-routine tasks at the same time. Any attempt to do so, will result in reduced performance and a rise in error rates.

Rosen also points out the likely results of the errors and costs associated with trying to multitask. She notes that Jonathan B. Spira, an analyst at the business research firm of Basex, has estimated a cost to U.S. businesses each year of up to \$650 billion based on lost productivity. Why is it then that so many businesses and their leaders embrace the idea of multitasking and actually foster its practice? It seems that they believe that it results in increased productivity and profit. But research shows it does not.

Instead of embracing multitasking as the foundation of our business or even private lives, stop trying to do two or more things at the same time and give a thought to the value of developing the fine art of paying acute attention to the things and events around you. As a start: turn off you computer, cell phone, and blackberry when in a meeting; let your phone go to voice mail when you are addressing a problem, preparing a report or have a person at your desk; finally, plan your day around your most pressing issues (prioritize). As Rosen notes from the work of psychologist William James, taking control of your attention capability “. . . is the very root of judgment, character, and will.”

Mike is a partner and coach at Wolf Leadership Development, LLC. He works with executives and pre-executives who desire to increase performance and take their leadership skills to the next level. His specialty is improving performance at work by improving relationship behaviors required of successful leaders. Mike can be contacted at mfarlow@wolfleadership.com.