

IS MULTITASKING bad for us?

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Multitasking has long been hailed as the Holy Grail of modern life. If we can multitask, the theory goes, our lives will be better: we'll be able to simultaneously write a report, answer the phone and email the boss, while also effortlessly juggling the balance of home, work and social life.

In our multimedia world, we can work anywhere, at any time and have access to all the information we need. Our lives are less delineated: the Internet, in particular, has blurred boundaries and made it easier for us to merge tasks. We can combine childcare with working online, study with watching TV and phoning friends with grocery shopping.

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But busier doesn't necessarily mean more productive. If you're constantly checking your email, tweets and RSS feeds, texting or talking on the phone, listening to people while watching a presentation or checking your blackberry while in a meeting, are you actually doing anything effectively?

Technically, multitasking is possible, even beneficial. If you've ever come out of a meeting to find your agenda covered in stick men then you probably enhanced your memory of what was discussed. Professor Jackie Andrade from the University of Plymouth found

that people who doodled while listening to information could recall facts better than those who 'concentrated' on the task. "Doodling helps because it takes just enough mental effort to stop you daydreaming, without itself being as effortful and disruptive as daydreaming," she says. If our brains are under-occupied, our minds will wander.

But for multitasking to be effective Andrade says the tasks need to use different parts of the brain. "Doodling is a better 'second task' than daydreaming, because it is repetitive and easy and because it is a visuospatial task. "If you were trying to listen to one thing and hold a conversation about another

then there would be massive competition, because both tasks need the same mental processes. Similarly, it would be impossible to doodle and drive a car at the same time." The ban on driving while using a phone shows we do recognise we're limited.

Last year, researchers at Stanford University set out to determine what exactly gives multitaskers their edge. They split people into two groups — those who do lots of media multitasking and those who don't — and asked them to perform various tasks. Against their expectations, they found that heavy multitaskers

are actually worse at switching effectively between tasks than people who don't usually multitask. They also have poorer memories and are slower at working.

According to Anthony Wagner, who co-authored the research, one of the reasons heavy multitaskers performed badly is that they find it difficult to ignore excess information. "When they're in situations where there are multiple sources of information coming from the external world or emerging out of memory, they're not able to filter out what's not relevant to their current goal," he said. "That failure to filter means they're slowed down by that irrelevant information."

Nowhere do you encounter more irrelevant information than online. The Internet is a procrastinator's paradise, where people dart from one piece of bite-size information to the next, continually distracted by hyperlinks and cross references, not to mention email and instant messaging. This promiscuity challenges web designers to make their sites 'sticky' so people will actually hang around rather than bouncing off and on to another. Online, distraction is cheap.

Tyler Wilson, Author of 'Create Your Own Economy: The Path to Prosperity in a Disordered World',



welcomes what he calls this "broader shift toward short and to the point."

"It may seem as if we have entered a nightmarish attention-deficit culture, but the situation is not nearly as gloomy as you have been told," he says. "Our culture of the short bit is making human minds more rather than less powerful. We access and absorb information more quickly than before."

Sounds great. Except that obtaining information is only the first step. We also need time for our brains to process the information we've just taken in and work out how it fits in with other information we already have. Not giving ourselves sufficient downtime to reflect, albeit subconsciously, on what we've learnt, can have knock-on effects.

Allison Keating, Psychologist and Director of the bWell clinic in Malahide, Co. Dublin, says too much multitasking can take a heavy emotional toll.

"I do see the results sitting with me," she says. "People are jaded, exhausted, their brains are foggy. They aren't actually switching off. People are anxious and stressed because they're overloaded in their thinking; they're nearly trying to mimic computers. They're living a high quantity life but not necessarily a high quality life."

Dr John Greaney, Lecturer in Psychology at the Centre for Creative Technologies and Applications, agrees that the Internet is having a negative effect in people's well beings and attention spans. "People are becoming unable to cope with periods of boredom. An artist, or anyone doing anything creative, needs to work through the difficult emotions that could easily be avoided by flitting around."

He thinks there's a middle way between raging against the modern world and giving in to goldfish-brain, one which you can achieve by taking small steps to rebalance your life. "Carve out some hours away

from the screen and away from being contacted all the time," he says. "Go to the park and read something out loud rather than doing it online."

Keating recommends that in order to truly relax and still the mind we do something that requires concentration, whether it's yoga, meditation or exercise. "When you actually do something specific, it makes you focus," she says. "People find it very relaxing; it gives their brain a break. Retraining your brain is completely possible; all you have to do is commit to doing it."

So that's the downtime. But when we're busy — and given that we're often expected to be constantly available — how do we make sure we spend our time effectively? Keating says the key is to be mindful. "Make yourself aware of when you're becoming distracted," she says. "Be aware of the need to finish one task from beginning to end." She recommends setting a time limit for each item on your to do list so you know when you're wasting time. "Think about the beginning, middle and end. How do I want it to look when it's finished?"

By concentrating on one task at a time, we also increase our chances of achieving 'flow': the ability to get so involved in an activity that you forget about everything else — even time. "Research has shown that we're most contented when we're 100% focused on something," says Keating. "It doesn't matter what you're actually doing but it matters that you're fully engaged in it. We're not experiencing flow enough anymore," she says.

Keating contemplates a future where businesses value the ability to get things done over the ability to multitask. "Will multitaskers be frowned upon in the future?" she asks. "Media multitaskers may not be finishers and these days it's important to get projects finished."

It turns out that when you're trying to get things done, sometimes less is more.