



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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How to Single-Task Your Way to Success

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- D**o you:
- Read e-mail while talking on the phone?
 - Talk on the phone while driving?
 - Read while watching TV?

Sure. Doesn't everyone? That way you accomplish twice as much. Or so the theory goes.

Multitasking sounds good—get more done in less time. That way, you can be a productivity prince or princess. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. Why? You make more mistakes, you accomplish less and you feel overwhelmed. The worst part of multitasking is that it negatively impacts your relationships with your loved ones and co-workers. And with yourself.

Where did the idea of multitasking come from? So-called productivity experts pushed the concept of multitasking based on how computers work. Picture yourself sitting at your computer writing a report. At the same time, you're downloading music. In computer-speak, you're using Microsoft Word in the foreground, while the download is occurring in the background. Two things are happening at the same time, enhancing your productivity.

Except your computer is actually doing only ONE thing at a time, just so fast it appears as if it's doing both tasks simultaneously. Your computer switches back and forth between tasks several thousand times per second. It does this so fast that no information or time is lost.

How is your brain different from a computer? Your brain can problem-solve in ways that computers can't, yet your brain doesn't have the capacity to switch back and forth between activities without losing the information currently in working memory.

When you interrupt a task you're engaged in, even just for a minute, by picking up your ringing telephone, whatever you were focused on before you picked up the phone is lost from your working memory. As you check to see who's calling, the data currently in the forefront of your mind disappears. If you want to pick up the thread again, you have to reconstitute it. Retrieve it from long-term memory—or look for clues in your environment, such as checking the notes you made about what you were working on.

WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT MULTI-TASKING?

Studies conducted at both Harvard and the University of Michigan indicate that multitasking does a lot more harm than good. Although people work faster when they multitask, they produce less. For example, people who spend time stopping and starting tasks take two to four times longer to complete them and make significantly more errors. Further, brain scans show that juggling tasks reduces the brain power available for each activity. Multitasking also causes stress, because it makes your brain switch back and forth between projects and retrieve lost information. As a result, you feel harried and anxious. Over time, stress hormones from multitasking can damage memory centers in your brain.

How about talking on your cell phone while driving? That's a good way to maximize time, right? Only if you think driving while under the influence makes sense. Research has shown that the risk associated with using your Bluetooth cell phone while driving is akin to driving drunk.

Then there's the human component:

- Multitasking means that you may be talking to your child while driving. Do you give them your full attention? No.
- It may mean that you're having a conversation with your spouse while you're scanning the Internet. "Uh-huh," you mindlessly reply when they ask if you love them.
- It may mean that you're checking e-mail while you're on the phone with a colleague. "What's your opinion, John?" she asks. "Huh?" you reply, sounding disengaged—because you are.

Worst of all, multitasking makes it impossible for you to live consciously. You're in two places at once, which means you're NOWHERE. To feel happier and be more successful, "Be Here Now." Love your life with all your heart and with all your mind.

TRY THIS:

1. Resolve to do one thing at a time.
2. In a notebook, make a list of all your outstanding tasks. All of them. Get them out of your head. (I suggest using a notebook so all your lists are in one place.)
3. Pick one task to focus on. I usually start with the

EASIEST. Why? So I can experience success. I know that many productivity experts suggest tackling the toughest task first. That's fine for folks who are naturally disciplined. I'm not. When I tackle the toughest task first, I just sit there, frozen by the enormity of what I'm trying to do.

4. Write down in your notebook what you're going to do and set the timer on your phone for 17 minutes.
5. Go to work.
6. Write down in your notebook any distracting thoughts, so you can come back to them later. For 17 minutes, choose to let your phone go to voice-mail. Resolve not to check e-mail on your computer or Blackberry. Turn off the sound associated with new e-mails coming in, so you're not disturbed.
7. When 17 minutes is up, pump your fist in the air and shout "YES!" to congratulate yourself. You've consciously chosen how to spend your time, your most valuable resource.
8. Get up and take a short breather. Stretch and look out the window. Drink a glass of water, because drinking water reduces stress. Then recommit yourself to completing another chunk. Or decide to do something completely different. Remember, it's your time—and your life. ●



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