

Multitasking Brings High Costs

- Marcia Hughes, President, Collaborative Growth

Remember the days when you could drive your car without even thinking about talking on the cell phone? Those were simpler times. In today's world many think multitasking is an unavoidable process, but how has attempting to perform all of these tasks simultaneously affected performance? The American Psychological Association has recently published an article examining this very topic, <http://www.apa.org/releases/multitasking.html>. They found that ultimately it takes longer and costs brain power to switch from topic to topic rather than focusing on one thing at a time.

If you are as busy as we are these days your to-do list can become overwhelming. To tackle the multitude of deeds that need to get done it seems reasonable to combine tasks. Why not peruse that new article while on a conference call? There also is a point of pride in these moments as we're too likely to think "My brain can handle multiple tasks at once. I'm smart!" or "I'm efficient!" In the end we need to ask ourselves an important question: "Is it more important that I just get this done or that I get this done to the best of my ability?" Given that what we produce becomes a reflection of ourselves this question is easy to answer – or at least it should be.

A study conducted by Stanford University researchers shows that when we multitask, such as talking on the phone and sending an instant message as we open up email, we're compromising everything we do. Adam Gorlick writes at <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/august24/multitask-research-study-082409.html> that "People who are regularly bombarded with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch from one job to another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time."

As Dr. Mary Case recently told attendees at the Emergenetics Brain Summit, "Higher switching = lower productivity!" Switching takes longer and our focus is compromised. The Stanford study found that the multitaskers couldn't complete simple tests like remembering a sequence of alphabetical letters well. They could not keep the information sorted out because they kept seeing all the details.

The bottom line is that the two groups (heavy media multitaskers and those who don't regularly do media multitasking) were given three tests and the heavy multitaskers lost in every case. Heavy multitaskers have trouble filtering out irrelevant information, which can also be thought of as organizing their memories. They have trouble focusing on the project at hand as they're thinking about what else is going on.

The conclusion we suggest you draw is slow down, enjoy the moment, and deliberately manage your stress. As you breathe take on one task, be it a call, an email or having a good thoughtful discussion with your colleague or family. You will have better relationships, stronger emotional intelligence and greater productivity overall. It's time to start breaking the habit of trying to do too much at once and claim your life you're your brain instead.