

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## Learn why it's often best not to multitask

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While you may know that studies have found that multitasking hurts productivity, the truth is you really haven't stopped trying to do more than one thing at a time, have you? After all, while some people may not be able to multitask well, that certainly doesn't include you.

Care to test that theory?

Here's how to test your multitasking abilities:

Have someone time you while you write the word "multitask" and then the numbers from 1 to 10. Record your time.

Have someone time you while you alternately write the letters of "multitask" and the numbers 1-10. For example, you will write "m" then "1" then "u" then "2" and so on. Record your time. After comparing the two times, chances are pretty good you no longer think you're a multitasking whiz.

Sanjeev Gupta uses the test when he arrives at companies that hire him to improve their productivity. His company, Realization, has worked with employers such as Delta Air Lines and Boeing, boosting project completion by as much as 50 percent.

But first, he has to prove to employees that their multitasking is causing more harm than good, so he uses the simple test to make his point.

"There are several reasons that people multitask," he says. "One of them is because people want to appear busy. Or, if they get stuck on something, they'll move onto something else instead of completing the task."

He says workers multitask now more than ever because they feel pressured to get more done. They're constantly moving from project to project, depending on who is demanding their time at any given moment. The result is that they never complete something before moving on, causing a ripple effect that causes other workers to get off track and miss deadlines.

But experts contend that not only is multitasking harmful to your productivity at work, it can affect all areas of your life. An Emory University study earlier this year found that such behavior can sap your ability to control other impulses, causing you to be much more prone to losing your temper or cheating on your diet.

Gupta says he believes multitasking continues to grow as a problem in the workplace because there is an increasing number of communication channels, he says. The phone, e-mail, instant messaging, Twitter and Facebook can lure away the attention of an employee who should be focused on completing a task, he says. The employee then jumps back into work, only to be then tempted to check Twitter updates or answer e-mails. The multitasking cycle continues, causing the employee to become less and less productive over time.

If you're looking for some ways to break the multitasking habit, consider these tips by Leo Babauta, author of "The Power of Less":

- Set a disconnect time each day. Try to work up to about two hours every day that you aren't connected to the Internet, your e-mail, phone or instant messaging. Let others know that this is a time you're off the grid. You may need to go somewhere without a connection to truly get away from temptation, or start in 20-minute increments and work your way up.
- Break bad habits. If you check your e-mail first thing in the morning, don't open up your browser for a set amount of time and instead use the time to do something else. If you find you break your rule, immediately call and report yourself to a supportive friend or family member.
- Break your day into sections. Use a set period to write, another period to answer e-mail and another period to think creatively. Set limits and don't let yourself stray into other territory until time is up.
- Cleanse your social networking habit. Start with 20 minutes, then a half day, then two to three days where you don't connect with Twitter, Facebook or any other social media site. Use the time to read books or long essays that interest you or watch thought-provoking films.

*Anita Bruzzese is author of "45 Things You Do That Drive Your Boss Crazy . . . and How to Avoid Them."*

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