

If multitasking has left you doing a lot but achieving little, it's time to take control and make time for deeper focus.

STORY TOM LONCAR

The ability to effectively multitask is usually seen as a virtue. Juggling projects of varying importance while attending to emails and phone notifications (often while at meetings with colleagues) is the reality for many.

Busyness without a sense of significant progress and achievement is a theme that crops up regularly among my executive coaching clients.

While yearning for the space to attend to the “smarter” things on their to-do lists – such as strategy development and more creative longer-term planning – many feel inundated by a deluge of small, relentless and apparently urgent tasks. Multitasking equates to doing a lot but achieving little.

In fact, multitasking isn't really “multi” at all. Professor of neuroscience at MIT Earl Miller suggests that our brains are actually switching focus back and forth between the tasks. These shifts in attention are not seamless – there can be a lag of several tenths of a second as our brain senses that a goal has shifted and new rules have been activated.

Research by David Meyer and Jeffrey Evans, of the University of Michigan, highlights the cumulative time impact of such task switching and suggests that it can be particularly costly when some of the activities are complex.

Given its drawbacks, why is multitasking so widespread? Simply put, the patterns of busyness it produces are addictive.

Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin suggests that the brain's dopamine reward circuit is activated as we notice and respond to items that emerge while we are multitasking. *Brain Wise* blog author Dr Susan Weinschenk points to the addictive qualities of apps and their irresistible notifications and beeps, enabling the creation of a “scrolling dopamine loop” that “just makes you want more”.

Multitasking cannot be avoided. But if you feel like it is no longer serving you well, here are some ideas to help re-establish control.

Are there periods in the day when you don't need to attend immediately to every digital notification and question from a colleague? Turning off email notifications for a specific

TOP TIPS

Turn off email notifications or put your phone away for an hour.

Try different start times and formats for regular meetings.

Let others know you're focusing on deep work so you aren't interrupted.

MYTH OF MULTITASKING

period (even just an hour), putting your phone away and respectfully delaying requests for conversations can allow for periods of deeper and smarter work.

Professor Steve Kay from the University of Southern California suggests that mid-morning is a peak period for our brain's working memory, alertness and concentration – a potentially fruitful period too often wasted on less cerebral tasks.

Taking charge of your day might also benefit from “old school” to-do lists. Professor Art Markman, of the University of Texas, recommends committing to-do items to your daily calendar as this can help fight the tide of interruptions by pulling the brain away from an always-reactive mode into one that is more focused and organised.

Wharton management professor Adam Grant uses out-of-office auto responses during periods of focus so that his colleagues know not to expect an immediate response – even when they see him in the office.

Meetings that were once useful may have lost their impact but remain locked into calendars. My clients have used a range of strategies to reclaim productivity. One senior leader reduced one-on-ones with her direct reports from one hour to 30 minutes. Productive dialogue increased markedly, thanks to the focus of a shorter time window.

To combat staleness in daily stand-up meetings, London-based agile team coach Magnus Dahlgren proposes experimenting, such as changing the start time, the

composition of participants and even the meeting format.

Multitasking can often push longer-term projects to the back-burner. In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the late Stephen Covey notes that “most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important”. Ruthlessly identifying unimportant interruptions and attending to them later can free up time for starting the things you've been putting aside.

Disrupting ingrained habits will take some effort, and there will inevitably be setbacks. To stay on track, let others know what you are trying to achieve. There may be opportunities to establish “accountability partnerships” with others who want to tackle multitasking overload. You can also use external support, such as an independent executive coach or a mentor who knows your working style.

If you lapse into old patterns, go easy on yourself; these reality checks can better enable you to catch yourself the next time a multitasking fork in the road emerges.

Such heightened self-awareness may also reveal other leadership benefits. As leadership guru the late Warren Bennis once said, all of the best leaders are also “first-class noticers”. The power of noticing is too often put aside in a frantic multitasked world. Seeing space where there was previously noise will serve your leadership development well.

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