

## Brain Overload: How Multitasking Hijacks Your Focus and Increases Anxiety

### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions. Give reasons for your answers.

- Do you (or someone you know) ever tried to cope with the pressure of work by working outside of work hours?
- Can you think of a time when you (or someone you know) did something for work in a weird place or situation?
- Attempting to do multiple tasks at once (multitasking) is increasingly common. How effective do you believe multitasking to be?

### 2 Reading for gist

a. Read the article quickly and choose the statement that best summarises the main idea.

1. One of the characteristics of modern office workers, especially post pandemic, is that they have successfully learnt how to do multiple tasks at the same time.
2. While it is tempting to do multiple tasks at the same time, it often can lead to creating rather than solving problems.
3. There are a small number of tasks that require focus but the vast majority can be done while doing other things.

### 2 Key words

a. Read the definitions and find the key words in the article that match them. The section number is given in brackets to help you. Check your answers and understanding of the words by using them to complete the example sentences immediately after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how the key words are used in context.

1. describes having very little of something, especially time or money \_\_\_\_\_  
(paragraph 1)  
*Can we have this meeting tomorrow? I'm \_\_\_\_\_ for time today.*
2. to have an effect that is too strong for someone to manage \_\_\_\_\_  
(paragraph 2)  
*At the end of the financial year, the amount of work can \_\_\_\_\_ people.*

3. feeling upset or annoyed over a long period of time \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 2)  
*He felt \_\_\_\_\_ by the new boss constantly sending emails and messages.*
4. delaying something you need to do because it is unpleasant or boring \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 2)  
*He likes to clean his desk before working, but I think that's just \_\_\_\_\_.*
5. something added to a bigger or more important thing \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 2)  
*She took a computer course as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ to her study of design.*
6. extremely surprised \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 4)  
*She was \_\_\_\_\_ when her colleague managed to finish the report in under an hour.*
7. the way something seems to be \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 4)  
*Being able to work from anywhere in the world with an internet connection puts a new \_\_\_\_\_ on the idea of working from home.*
8. someone who works slowly, but without enthusiasm or interest \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 5)  
*If you need this quickly, don't ask Graham to do it. He's a real \_\_\_\_\_!*
9. to switch between one thing and another, especially on a computer \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 6)  
*I prefer using a keyboard to a mouse when I'm \_\_\_\_\_ between windows.*
10. likely to show particular characteristics, especially negative ones \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 7)  
*She is a great salesperson but she is \_\_\_\_\_ to arriving late.*
11. a good solution or technique for doing something \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 8)  
*My dad taught me this great \_\_\_\_\_ for when you are cutting onions.*
12. to avoid something unpleasant \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 9)  
*The CEO will discuss any topic, but she'll \_\_\_\_\_ any question about pay.*

13. a series of actions that lead to a result \_\_\_\_\_ (paragraph 11)

*Do the proposal early because getting the finance is a long \_\_\_\_\_.*

14. to be given an unofficial or funny name \_\_\_\_\_  
(paragraph 11)

*He had fired so many people that he was \_\_\_\_\_ 'The Terminator'.*

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**RESEARCH SHOWS THE HUMAN BRAIN CAN'T COPE WITH DOING TOO MUCH AT ONCE, SO DON'T TAKE THAT MEETING WHILE YOU DOG WALK**

**BY CAMILLA CAVENDISH**

- 1 An arresting claim has dropped into my inbox. A quarter of Brits, a new survey says, are sending emails from the loo, because they are so pressed for time. "Relaxing is a thing of the past", wails the press release, which says that a third of respondents are continuing to work on their phones in the evening — "while watching their TV programmes". Ah.
- 2 With "overwhelm" a feature of modern life, reports such as this imply that harassed workers are forced to multitask to keep on top of ballooning demands. But when 13 per cent of respondents admit to having done a weekly online shop during a business meeting, I wonder what's happened to Saturday — and to their boss. Have we reached peak procrastination, in which meetings are now a performative adjunct to real life — walking the dog and cleaning the house, which respondents to this survey had done while on work calls?
- 3 Proponents of multitasking like to remind us that Archimedes had his eureka moment while in the bath. But he was letting his mind wander while he soaked. He wasn't sitting there with his camera off, trying not to splash while others warbled on.
- 4 I recently asked a painter for a quote for some decorating. We got chatting while he took a look at various walls. Since the pandemic, he told me, he's been flabbergasted by how often he arrives at a house to find grown men sitting on their sofas, watching sport in the middle of the day while vaguely tapping on their keyboards. This puts a new complexion on "overwork".
- 5 These days, if you do just one thing at a time you're thought to be a plodder. But 20 years of evidence tells us that task-switching makes most people stupider. A University of Utah study from 2006 found that talking on the phone while driving is as dangerous as being drunk: it slows reactions. The same team has more recently reported that car "infotainment" systems are even more dangerous than phones in terms of distraction.
- 6 Our brains are primarily wired to do one thing at a time. Even walking and talking starts to get tricky when we get old. This doesn't mean life has to be a monotonous sequence. Many workers enjoy toggling between tasks, according to the Centre for Attention Studies, at King's College London, and it can be positive. Indeed, "interleaving" — switching between topics then coming back to them later — is all the rage in schools as a proven technique for exam revision.
- 7 But growing levels of anxiety mean it's important to turn the conversation to focus. Difficulty concentrating is highly correlated with some of the anxiety disorders recognised by the American Psychiatric Association. And we tend to overestimate our ability to multitask. In fact, those most prone to juggling should do it least: because studies show they are more impulsive and have less executive control.
- 8 I fear I fall into that latter group, but I've recently found two simple hacks. I tried checking email only twice a day, but that doesn't suit my personality or my working life. Instead, I've gone back to handwriting a to-do list. The list's existence releases my brain from anguish — as long as the tasks are detailed enough. And using pen and paper seems to imprint it more deeply into my subconscious. This is supported by new research which finds that we make more elaborate brain connections when we write than when we type. Those connections are crucial for memory formation — and this makes it imperative to keep children going with handwriting.
- 9 I'm also trying out what Cal Newport, in his book *Slow Productivity*, calls a "pull system". Essentially, you focus ruthlessly on your top three projects and dodge as much as possible of the premature communication, meetings about meetings and messages about meetings which relate to later projects. Only when you've finished one of your top three do you pull the next one up into that slot.

*Continued on next page*

- 10 We will all have different versions of this system — and I suppose it could just be called “focus”. But following my own version has made me reflect how often the distinction gets lost between work that actually generates revenue, drives things forward and has meaning; and work that is process. By which I mean the pre-meeting, the compliance training module, the ever-swelling “reply all” email chain and so on. The first kind of work is far more satisfying. The second may well be the kind that office workers report doing on the dog walk and the toilet — and what my new decorator friend says he’s glad to have less of in his physical job.
- 11 Such process tasks, I suspect, are more enjoyable if done to a background of music, texts, scrolling or intermittently checking the football score. The problem is that people who switch between multiple channels — dubbed heavy media multitaskers by researchers at Stanford — display worse memory and lower executive control, even when focusing on a single job.
- 12 It turns out there are some “supertaskers”, those who are able to handle multiple tasks without losing efficiency. On brain scans, this group exhibit less brain activity, not more, when additional tasks are added. Unfortunately, only about 2 per cent of us are in that category. So it would be kinder to ourselves, and our employers, to acknowledge that attention spans are not infinite, and treat them with care.

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Camilla Cavendish 07 February 2025.

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## 4 Understanding the article

a. Are these sentences True or False according to the information in the article? Tick (✓) the true sentences and rewrite the false ones.

1. Four out of every ten people in the United Kingdom have sent an email from the toilet. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. People are commonly trying to combine meetings with doing their household tasks. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Talking on the phone while drinking is as dangerous as driving. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Interleaving is an academic technique for studying multiple topics at the same time. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. People who habitually engage in multitasking are the most effective at multitasking. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Typing creates less elaborate connections than writing by hand. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Focusing on only a small number of projects at a time shows you how much of your work is connected to those projects. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Process tasks are typically seen as being more satisfying and meaningful. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. People who multitask have a worse memory than those who focus on a single task. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. 98% of the general population are not supertaskers. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 5 Business language – expressing quantity and increase

a. Write each word or phrase in the correct column of the table.

a quarter	ever-swelling	most	top three
a third	growing	some	two per cent
ballooning	many	thirteen per cent	

Fraction / %	Quantity	Increase

b. Use one of the words or phrases from the table to complete the sentences.

- 66% of the people interviewed said they were satisfied with the product, but \_\_\_\_\_ either said they were unsatisfied or didn't respond.
- Estonia, Switzerland and Ireland were the \_\_\_\_\_ countries in terms of reading scores.
- Given how much the inclusion of AI into business products has been \_\_\_\_\_ in recent years, it is likely to reach a bursting point soon.
- The election result split the country in two: the prime minister got the majority of votes, but there were \_\_\_\_\_ who voted for the other party.
- \_\_\_\_\_ of the shareholders want to see women in positions of power, so the company is changing its recruitment policies.
- Among the sales team, most are happy with the new software, a few hate it and \_\_\_\_\_ see no significant difference.

c. Add a word for a fraction, a quantity and an increase to the table.

d. Now choose six words or phrases from the table and write your own sentences.

## 6 Discussion

### a. Discuss these questions.

1. In your opinion, how prevalent has the practice of multitasking become in everyday work life?
2. How did the increase of people working from home impact the practice of multitasking and what are companies doing to address this?
3. What are the most significant problems caused by people not focusing on their work?
4. What ways do you know to help improve focus and increase productivity?

## Wider business theme – A case study: evaluating productivity hacks

### a. You are going to carry out a survey on popular productivity hacks. You will then test out one of these hacks and present its effectiveness to the class. Work through the steps of this task with a partner.

1. Brainstorm or research a list of popular productivity hacks such as the three mentioned in the article.
2. Survey your classmates on their experience with or opinion on these productivity hacks. Try to evaluate the different productivity hacks based on their responses.
3. Decide which of the hacks is the most effective and use it for a period of time, e.g. a week. Keep a record of your observations as you try using the hack.
4. At the end of the period of time, create a presentation in which you explain:
  - what made you evaluate this hack as being the most productive
  - how someone could apply the hack to their everyday work life
  - what effect the hack had on your focus or productivity
5. Present your hack to the class and compare your findings with others.

### Useful language

*Most / some / a few of our classmates ...*

*Our reason for selecting this hack was ...*

*You could incorporate this hack into your routine by ...*

*What I most noticed was ... / The biggest change was ...*