

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 do work-related tasks outside of work hours? Why?
- What is the weirdest place or situation you know of someone doing something for work?
- How effective is the technique of doing multiple things at once?

2 Reading for gist

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

1. Modern workers have successfully learnt how to do multiple tasks at the same time.
2. Doing multiple tasks at the same time creates more problems than it solves.
3. There are some tasks that need focus but many can be done while doing other things.

3 Key words

a. Choose the key words that match the definitions. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using them to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how the key words are used in context.

dodge	multitask	pressed	prone
hack	overwhelm	process	toggling
harassed	plodder	procrastination	adjunct

1. describes having very little of something, especially time or money _____
Can we have this meeting tomorrow? I'm _____ for time today.
2. to have an effect that is too strong for someone to manage _____
At the end of the financial year, the amount of work can _____ people.
3. feeling upset or annoyed over a long period of time _____
He felt _____ by the new boss constantly sending emails and messages.
4. doing multiple things at the same time _____
It is a popular idea that women can _____ better than men.

5. delaying something you need to do because it is unpleasant or boring _____
He likes to clean his desk before working, but I think that's just _____.
6. something added to a bigger or more important thing _____
She took a computer course as a(n) _____ to her study of design.
7. someone who works slowly, but without enthusiasm or interest _____
If you need this quickly, don't ask Graham to do it. He's a real _____!
8. to switch between one thing and another, especially on a computer _____
I prefer using a keyboard to a mouse when I'm _____ between windows.
9. likely to show particular characteristics, especially negative ones _____
She is a great salesperson but she is _____ to arriving late.
10. a good solution or technique for doing something _____
My dad taught me this great _____ for when you are cutting onions.
11. to avoid something unpleasant _____
The CEO will discuss any topic, but she'll _____ any question about pay.
12. a series of actions that lead to a result _____
Do the proposal early because getting the finance is a long _____.

Brain Overload: How Multitasking Hijacks Your Focus and Increases Anxiety

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.

FT

Camilla Cavendish 07 February 2025.

© The Financial Times.

All rights reserved.

Articles republished from the *Financial Times*.

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. Meetings are becoming an extra thing people do at the same time as important 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 have a habit of 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 more satisfying and meaningful. _____

9. People who multitask have a worse memory than those who focus on a single task. _____

10. 98% of people are not supertaskers. _____

5 Business language – expressing quantity

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

a quarter	many	some	top three
a third	most	thirteen per cent	two per cent

Fraction	%	Expressions of quantity

b. Replace the words in bold with one of the words or phrases from the table.

- 66% of the people interviewed said they were satisfied with the product but **33%** either said they were unsatisfied or didn't respond. _____
- Estonia, Switzerland and Ireland were the **three best** countries in terms of reading scores.

- The election result divided the country: the prime minister got enough votes to win but there were a **large number** who voted for the other party. _____
- The majority** of the shareholders want the company to change strategy so the company is changing its policies. _____
- Among the sales team, a large number are happy with the new software, a few hate it and **several** see no significant difference. _____

6 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- In your opinion, how common is multitasking in everyday work life?
- Has the increase of people working from home made multitasking more or less common?
- How significant is the problem of people not focusing on their work?
- What ways do you know to help improve focus and increase productivity?

7 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. Examples include:
 - the Pomodoro technique,
 - checking email only twice a day,
 - handwriting a to-do list,
 - the pull system, etc.
2. Survey your classmates on their experience with or opinion on these productivity hacks. Try to evaluate the different productivity hacks based on the responses. Areas to ask questions about include:
 - how easy the hack is to do
 - how much the hack could help people to focus or be productive
 - how much the hack could change the way they work
 - what changes they might make to the hack
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:
 - why you chose the hack
 - how the hack works
 - 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 ...

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

What I would recommend is ...