

WISDOM SESSION

The Myth of Multitasking, Part 2

“You can do two things at once, but you can’t focus effectively on two things at once.”

— Gary Keller

So, what’s happening when we’re actually doing two things at once? It’s simple. We’ve separated them. Our brain has channels, and as a result we’re able to process different kinds of data in different parts of our brain. This is why you can talk and walk at the same time. There is no channel interference. But here’s the catch: you’re not really focused on both activities. One is happening in the foreground and the other in the background. If you were trying to talk a passenger through landing a DC-10, you’d stop walking. Likewise, if you were walking across a gorge on a rope bridge, you’d likely stop talking. You can do two things at once, but you can’t focus effectively on two things at once. Even my dog Max knows this. When I get caught up with a basketball game on TV, he gives me a good nudge. Apparently, background scratches can be pretty unsatisfying.

Many think that because their body is functioning without their conscious direction, they’re multitasking. This is true, but not the way they mean it. A lot of our physical actions, like breathing, are being directed from a different part of our brain than where focus comes from. As a result, there’s no channel conflict. We’re right when we say something is “front and center” or “top of mind,” because that’s where focus occurs - in the prefrontal cortex. When you focus, it’s like shining a spotlight on what matters. You can actually give attention to two things, but that is what’s called “divided attention.” And make no mistake. Take on two things and your attention gets divided. Take on a third and something gets dropped.

The problem of trying to focus on two things at once shows up when one task demands more attention or if it crosses into a channel already in use. When your spouse is describing the way the living room furniture has been rearranged, you engage your visual cortex to see it in your mind’s eye. If you happen to be driving at that moment, this channel interference means you are now seeing the new sofa and love seat combination and are effectively blind to the car braking in front of you. You simply can’t effectively focus on two important things at the same time.

Every time we try to do two or more things at once, we’re simply dividing up our focus and dumbing down all of the outcomes in the process. Here’s the short list of how multitasking short-circuits us:

1. There is just so much brain capability at any one time. Divide it up as much as you want, but you’ll pay a price in time and effectiveness.
2. The more time you spend switched to another task, the less likely you are to get back to your original task. This is how loose ends pile up.
3. Bounce between one activity and another and you lose time as your brain reorients to the new task. Those milliseconds add up. Researchers estimate we lose 28% of an average workday to multitasking ineffectiveness.

continued on page 2

WISDOM SESSION

4. Chronic multitaskers develop a distorted sense of how long it takes to do things. They almost always believe tasks take longer to complete than is actually required.
5. Multitaskers make more mistakes than non-multitaskers. They often make poorer decisions because they favor new information over old, even if the older information is more valuable.
6. Multitaskers experience more life-reducing happiness-squelching stress.

With research overwhelmingly clear, it seems insane that - knowing how multitasking leads to mistakes, poor choices, and stress - we attempt it anyway. Maybe it's just too tempting. Workers who use computers during the day change windows or check e-mail or other programs nearly 37 times an hour. Being in a distractible setting sets us up to be more distractible. Or maybe it's the high. Media multitaskers actually experience a thrill with switching - a burst of dopamine - that can be addictive. Without it, they can feel bored. For whatever the reason, the results are unambiguous: multitasking slows us down and makes us slower witted.

Think of it this way. If we really lose almost a third of our workday to distractions, what is the cumulative loss over a career? What is the loss to other careers? To businesses? When you think about it, you might just discover that if you don't figure out a way to resolve this, you could in fact lose your career or your business. Or worse, cause others to lose theirs.

On top of work, what sort of toll do our distractions take on our personal lives? Author Dave Crenshaw put it just right when he wrote, "The people we live with and work with on a daily basis deserve our full attention. When we give people segmented attention, piecemeal time, switching back and forth, the switching cost is higher than just the time involved. We end up damaging relationship." Every time I see a couple dining with one partner trying earnestly to communicate while the other is texting under the table, I'm reminded of the simple truth of that statement.

- *The One Thing*

"Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind." – Ecclesiastes 4:6

PDP - Process Determines Progress

August 22, 2022



David Trent believes that wisdom comes from continually seeking to learn and grow through relationships and reading, which leads to personal development. In an effort to inspire learning in others, David Trent sends out weekly Wisdom Sessions. He recommends purchasing and reading any book source used in these Wisdom Sessions.