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Business Literature: Author's Choice

When Not to Multitask

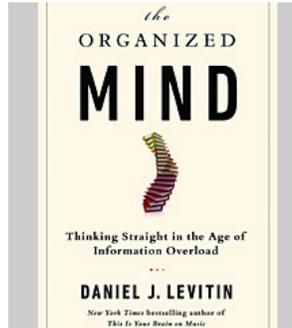
Nicholas Carr, author of *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us*, introduces a lesson in generating deeper insights from *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*, by Daniel J. Levitin.

by [Nicholas G. Carr](#)

We should be thankful for our ability to multitask. If we couldn't shift our mental gears quickly, we wouldn't be able to have a conversation while cooking a meal, listen to music while composing an email, or walk and chew gum at the same time. Life would be dull.

But as neuroscientist Daniel Levitin explains in the excerpt below, multitasking can all too easily become pathological. When we expend too much of our mental energy skipping from one thing to the next, we cut ourselves off from the highest forms of thought our brains are capable of. Conceptual and critical thinking, insight and ingenuity emerge only when we screen out distractions and focus our minds.

Turning off the multitasking instinct is becoming ever more difficult. Our modern technological environment seems designed to scatter our attention. It's hard to imagine a more perfect distraction machine than a smartphone. But making the effort to escape the informational whirlwind remains essential. A calm mind is a fruitful mind. The owl is wiser than the magpie.

—Nicholas Carr *Journal*. He blogs at [Rough Type](#).

An excerpt from chapter 7 of *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*

We all want to believe that we can do many things at once and that our attention is infinite, but this is a persistent myth. What we really do is shift our attention rapidly from task to task. Two bad things happen as a result: We don't devote enough attention to any one thing, and we decrease the quality of attention applied to any task. When we do one thing—uni-task—there are beneficial changes in the brain's daydreaming network and increased connectivity. Among other things, this is believed to be protective against Alzheimer's disease. Older adults who engaged in five one-hour training sessions on attentional control began to show brain activity patterns that more closely resembled those of younger adults.

You'd think that people would realize they're bad at multitasking and would quit. But a cognitive illusion sets in, fueled in part by a dopamine-adrenalin feedback loop, in which multitaskers *think* that they are doing great. Part of the problem is that workplaces are misguidedly encouraging workers to multitask. [Stanford professor Clifford] Nass notes a number of societal forces that encourage multitasking. Many managers impose rules such as "You must answer email within 15 minutes" or "You must keep a chat window open," but this means you're stopping what you're doing, fragmenting concentration, Balkanizing the vast resources of your prefrontal cortex, honed over tens of thousands of years of evolution to *stay on task*. This stay-on-task mode is what gave us the pyramids, mathematics, great cities, literature, art, music, penicillin and rockets to the moon (and hopefully—soon—*jet packs*). Those kinds of discoveries cannot be made in fragmented 2-minute increments.

"Workplaces are misguidedly encouraging workers to multitask."

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It is a testament to our cognitive flexibility and neural plasticity that we are able to go against all this evolution, but at least until the next evolutionary leap in our prefrontal cortex, multitasking leads to not more work but less, not better work but sloppier work. Adding to this, every day we are confronted with new Facebook and Instagram updates, new YouTube videos, Twitter streams, and whatever new technology will replace them in the next year or two. As of this writing, there were thirteen hundred apps for mobile devices being released *every day*. "Cultural forces, and the expectation that people will respond instantly, and chat and talk and do all these things all at once, means all the pressure is going that way," Nass says.

The companies that are winning the productivity battle are those that allow their employees productivity hours, naps, a chance for exercise, and a calm, tranquil, *orderly* environment in which to do their work. If you're in a stressful environment, where you're asked to produce and produce, you're unlikely to have any deep insights. There's a reason Google puts Ping-Pong tables in their headquarters. Safeway Stores, a \$4 billion grocery chain in the U.S. and Canada, has doubled sales in the last 15 years under the leadership of Steven Burd, who, among other things, encouraged employees to exercise at work, through salary

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THE REVIEWER

Nicholas Carr is the author of four influential books about technology, including *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* (W.W. Norton, 2014) and *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton, 2010). Carr has been executive editor of *Harvard Business Review* and a columnist for *The Guardian* in London, and he has written for the *Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. He blogs at [Rough Type](#).

THIS BOOK

The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload (Dutton, 2014) by Daniel J. Levitin

Daniel J. Levitin is the James McGill Professor of Psychology, Behavioural Neuroscience, and Music at [McGill University](#), and dean of arts and humanities at the [Minerva Schools at Keck Graduate Institute](#). He is also the author of *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (Dutton, 2008) and *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (Dutton, 2006).

incentives, and installed a full gym at corporate headquarters. [Burd retired in 2013.] Studies have found that productivity goes up when the number of hours per week of work goes down, strongly suggesting that adequate leisure and refueling time pays off for employers and for workers. Overwork—and its companion, sleep deprivation—have been shown to lead to mistakes and errors that take longer to fix than the overtime hours worked. A sixty-hour work week, although 50% longer than a forty-hour work week, reduces productivity by 25%, so it takes two hours of overtime to accomplish one hour of work. A ten-minute nap can be equivalent to an extra hour and a half of sleep at night.

—Daniel J. Levitin

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 **Iorrainehope98** 201 days ago

 I totally agree. In the days of Social Media and Mobile Phone apps distraction is becoming the norm. I have been sure for a while that deep concentration is affected by flitting between tasks.

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 **Robert Becker** 211 days ago

 I attended a Chicago Ideas Week event a few days ago in which Daniel Levitin spoke in a session called The Brain. He was fascinating. He makes a great contribution in his new book to the way we think about thinking and about work.

If you liked Daniel Kahneman's Thinking Fast and Slow, you'll like The Organized Mind for some of the same reasons.

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 **Dr. W. A. Sussland** 213 days ago

All generalities are generally wrong ... including this one. Assuredly, multi-tasking is not for everyone ! However, those than can and most likely enjoy doing it, and they tend to be the bright ones and the best collective content creators on both dimensions of the , i.e. horizontally and vertically in the organization. Look at your business leaders - at all levels and functions - you will find that they multi-task, that they multi-task avoiding excesses if they are well organized.

Increasingly, we need people to understand the preceding and the following links on both dimensions of the firstly to optimize the linkage, secondly to contribute to innovation, thirdly to feel part of a larger organization than just focusing on a single task. Already in TQM, we told people to focus on their task as well as on the value created at the end of the value-chain.

At the time of my consulting on TQM, I used to focus on managing processes. Now, focusing on , I look at management project-by-project in the frame of the architecture and the network of projects. "The Innovative Enterprise" is based on constant alert - adaptive - agile networking-teamwork, and that involves meaningful multi-tasking, which underpins commitment, cooperation, collective content creation. That said, the innovative enterprise will find the right people, people that are capable of mastering multi-tasking, of managing stress and strain, of being nimble and quick, and of driving collective efforts.

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ServantLeader

207 days ago

This response validates my observation that those people who multitask have a great sense of their own importance and superiority and feel some of their attention and time should be acceptable and welcomed by those of us who need their valued insight.

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andy_mcf

213 days ago

Vast expanses of human potential are turned into veritable wastelands because people are bad at pruning low-yield efforts from their 'to do' lists. More here on how to uni-task your way to excellence! <http://bit.ly/X9U86i>

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JuBu

213 days ago

This sounds like a great book to remind me to slow down and focus. It was interesting reading the review with multiple flashing ads all around the text on the website encouraging us to get caught up in the multitasking urgency mode.

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