

Multitasking does not work - and here's why

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It's an accepted part of working life that the flow of information and rate of decisions to action that information is increasing.

To survive in this environment skills like multitasking are held as essential.

There are many stories about how many emails are answered each day; how the work day is interrupted with constant demands, and how a working day can be bombarded with distractions, all important in their own way, but which make focusing on complex issues difficult.

The anecdotal evidence on the levels of mental pressure is not just a widespread complaint. It now has support from neuroscientist Daniel Levitin, author of *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload*, who contends that how communications technologies are used reduces efficiency, leads to less than optimal decisions and affects productivity.

Levitin's examination of brain chemistry explains how and why. Through evolution our brains developed in ways that now - complemented with computers, the internet, smartphones and texting - produces signals and rewards in the brain. All that activity can seem really useful. In other words multitasking can appear to be highly productive and beneficial.

Except that the brain is very good at deluding itself.

Levitin's tests show mental capacity affected in several ways. Busy-ness can appear to be its own reward.

Levitin's insight does not imply that email and other messaging technologies are not useful. It's a matter of how they are used. How email, in particular, is abused means time and decision-making is given to answering everything from the significant to the unimportant. The medium creates, as is often said, so much clutter.

For the majority of workers who rely on email and all the other available collaboration tools, these technologies may be affecting the quality of their work.

We may not realise it but Levitin's brain scans suggest it. The reduction in efficiency due to stress from so much information may have consequences on organisational productivity - that is, the value that is ultimately created.

This might manifest across a range of areas: on the application of resources, deployment of technology, project management, or adapting innovative practice in the workplace.

A reduction in efficiency will have various effects, none of them individually significant but over time, and with all the functions that are carried out daily, gradually eroding high levels of competence.

In many organisations, our body is governed by practices and rules regarding breaks to cut stress, improve posture with good seating and generally keeping it in reasonable working condition.

The brain has no such guarantees. It is expected to function at full capacity and make several hundred decisions, manage input from colleagues, and much more besides. In this environment it's not surprising that burnout happens.

If the messaging tools we use every day are creating difficulties then the neuroscientist's evidence suggests some remedial action is needed.

Such action may not be major, it may suffice to just deal with things at the margin by cutting out the irrelevant and imposing rules to allow greater focus.

It's easier said than done.

The reason email fills up the work day is because it costs almost nothing to send. Perhaps daily email quotas could cut some of the email transmissions. It would be a sort of tax. Overall and over time it could provide an efficiency dividend. At first it might restrict the flow of information, but it could deliver focus.

Making good decisions is what distinguishes strong managers and leaders. As more automation enters the workplace and replaces jobs, making good decisions is what will differentiate those jobs that transition into mere algorithms from those that still require a brain to make them.

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This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/it-pro/expertise/multitasking-does-not-work--and-heres-why-20150213-13dxt.html>