multitasking

myth or advantage?

Take a second to look at all the things in front of you right now. If you're like most people, you've got at least a few browser windows open (each one loaded with tabs you "need"). Your email inbox is steadily filling up in the background. And of course, your phone... In other words, you're *multitasking*.

The problem is, there's no such thing as multitasking. As multiple studies have confirmed, true multitasking, doing more than one task at the same time is a myth. Those people who think they can split their attention between multiple tasks at once aren't actually getting more done. In fact, they're doing less, getting more stressed out, and performing worse than those who single-task.

So why do so many of us spend our days trying to multitask?
And if it's so bad for us, how can we break the cycle and protect our attention, focus, and time?

While most of us can do something as simple as walking and chewing gum or holding a conversation at the same time, the same can't be said for more complex tasks. David Meyer, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor says we simply don't have the brain power to multitask:

"... as long as you're performing complicated tasks that require the same parts of the brain, and you need to devote all that capacity for these tasks, there just aren't going to be resources available to add anything more."

When we looked at the data from a study of 50,000+ people, we found that the average worker spends 40.1% of their productive time a day multitasking with communication tools alone. But according to Dr. Meyer, trying to split your attention between tasks that require effort and concentration means one or both of them will suffer: *"Once you start to make things more complicated, things get messier, and as a result, there's going to be interference with one or more of the tasks. Either you're going to have to slow down on one of the tasks, or you're going to start making mistakes."*

Among other things, multitasking:

Impacts your short-term memory and leads to increased anxiety
Inhibits creative thinking and stops you from getting into a state of flow
Causes more mistakes and less productivity

Multiple studies have found that multitasking causes people to take longer to do simple tasks, drops your IQ by an average of 10 points, and can even have the same negative impact as losing a night's sleep.

5 ways to reduce the amount of multitasking you do each day:

Create a daily schedule with dedicated time for focused work
Limit your email time and work in "bursts"
Make it clear that you don't want to be distracted
Alternate between periods of focus and breaks
Optimize your work environment for focus
Break big tasks into smaller milestones
Eliminate distractions that pull you into multitasking
Clean up your workspace
Make a to-do list

PRO~TIP: Figure out when exactly you're most productive at work to help eliminate your brain from thinking of other tasks so you can singularly focus on that project you need to complete. Then leave the less important tasks to be done during your weaker moments during other hours of the day.

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