The Rise and Fall of Multitasking

Although multitasking was initially touted as the productivity skill of the new millennium and heavily promoted by the business community, today even media stars such as Suze Orman reject it: "I think it's the absolute ruination of the perfection of a project" (Wallis & Steptoe, p. 76). In fact, most of what people call “multitasking” is really a sequential process: people switch back and forth between different tasks, interrupting one activity to pursue another. Cognitive scientists call the process of moving from one task to another "task switching”; each switch involves a psychological cost. In most contexts, overall productivity is reduced in proportion to the number of switches. The switch penalty is greater for more complex tasks (Rubinstein, Meyer, & Evans, 2001).

Internet browsing, online social networking, and texting have become ubiquitous in our lives—especially in the lives of students. Engagement with media has quickly impinged upon homework, which has “become a magnet for multitasking, with many young people failing to devote the kind of single-minded attention for which their teachers might hope” (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005, p. 23). Early results “suggest that heavy media multitaskers are distracted by the multiple streams of media they are consuming,” whereas those who focus on single tasks “are more effective at volitionally allocating their attention (Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009, p. 15585). Research has begun to focus on specific multi-tasking situations. An examination of college students concluded that “instant messaging and multitasking during academic endeavours carries costs” (Bowman, Levine, Waite, & Gendron, 2009, p. 931).

Clearly, multitaskers perform too inefficiently to justify the practice in most situations. However, as they work, many heavy multitaskers believe they are being very effective. “That illusion of competence is one of the things that worry scholars,” noted David Glenn (2010), citing a study that concluded “self-described multitaskers performed much worse on cognitive and memory tasks that involved distraction than did people who said they preferred to focus on single tasks” (p. B6). They are simultaneously the worst performers and the least likely to acknowledge their poor performance.
References


