

HOW TO BE A SUCCESS AT EVERYTHING

MONOTASKING IS THE NEW MULTITASKING

HOW CAN YOU GET ANYTHING DONE WHEN YOUR "TASKS" TURN INTO COMPETING PREOCCUPATIONS? IN THIS AGE OF DISTRACTION, IT'S ALL ABOUT MONOTASKING. HERE ARE SIX TIPS FOR DOING IT RIGHT.

BY: LAURA VANDERKAM

We all know multitasking is inefficient. A classic 2007 study of Microsoft workers found that when they responded to email or instant messaging alerts, it took them, on average, nearly 10 minutes to deal with their inboxes or messages, and another 10-15 minutes to really get back into their original tasks. That means that a mere three distractions per hour can preclude you from getting anything else done.

Then there's the relationship "inefficiency" that comes from multitasking. You can spend hours rebuilding the good will torched by a single glance at your phone during an inopportune time.

We know this, yet we keep doing it. I checked my inbox after writing the opening paragraphs of this piece (nothing but press releases, alas). As Carson Tate, a productivity consultant and founder of Working Simply, puts it, "We've reprogrammed ourselves that that bright shiny object--whatever flashes next--is probably more interesting than what we're doing."

No human activity is immune. Peter Bregman, author of 18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done, reports that he recently went out to dinner without his phone. "I went to the bathroom and thought, what am I supposed to do in here?" Even the time spent walking from the table to the bathroom felt like it should have been filled: "We no longer have a moment of silence or pause."

Fortunately, there are ways to learn to focus. "We're all capable of monotasking, it's just that we choose not to," says Bregman. Here's how to choose differently:

Live right

There are many reasons to exercise, hydrate, and get enough sleep--and the ability to fight distractions is one of them. Several studies have found that exercise improves brain function and focus. A study published in early 2012 in the Journal of Nutrition found that women who were mildly dehydrated were less able to concentrate on cognitive tests. A lack of sleep is also associated with inability to focus, as anyone who's tried to work on a difficult project after being up all night with a screaming baby can attest.

Tie yourself to the mast

To resist the original siren song, Odysseus bound himself to his ship so he couldn't pursue these tempting creatures. Likewise, if your smartphone is the major source of your multitasking habit, you can just leave it at home. Says Bregman: "It's much more effective to create an environment that predisposes you to do the things you do want to do or don't want to do than to use willpower." Willpower, for the most part, doesn't work. To be sure, you probably have good reasons to carry a phone, but keep in mind that parents left their kids with babysitters before cell phones existed, and businesses grew and thrived before their invention as well.

Play offense

If you're deeply absorbed in a difficult but doable project--in a state termed as "flow" by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi--other tasks are naturally less interesting. Try to spend as much time as possible in this state.

Don't tolerate boredom

Bregman once spent a week consciously avoiding multitasking. "What I found is that I had much less tolerance for wasting my time," he says. If stuck in a boring meeting, normally he'd check email. Without the ability to multitask, "suddenly one-hour meetings were turning into 30-minute meetings because I didn't have the tolerance for sitting around doing nothing." Put your

commitments through the wringer of focus. If you couldn't do anything else during that time, would it still be worth it? If not, maybe you shouldn't do it.

Plan

Another major culprit in multitasking is that we don't have clarity on what we should be doing at any given time. Tate recommends asking, "Where do you add value to your company, and how close to the revenue line is my daily work?" With those questions in mind, decide on your most important tasks for a day, then look at your schedule and see where you can do these tasks. That way, when one meeting ends, you know what you need to get done before the next one--and you'll be more disciplined about focusing until finished.

Accept your limits

If you can honestly pay attention to something for just 15 minutes, then divide all projects into 15-minute tasks. Do one, then switch over to another. If you work somewhere defined by constant email contact, try serial monotasking. You're probably allowed to go to the bathroom or grab a coffee, which means it's okay to be unconnected for 20-30 minutes. Try going offline for 30 minutes, then checking email for 30. Repeat, until what you intend to do is done.

[Image: Flickr user [Andrew Hurley](#)]



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