

Multitasking can have a negative impact on your career

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Multitasking can decrease your productivity at work

In today's tech-savvy work environment, many people pride themselves in their ability to multitask, but while many think it increases productivity and saves time, it can impact you negatively in many ways.

Executive Business Coach, Penny Holburn, says multitasking can result in decreased efficiency and productivity, elevated heart rates, high levels of stress – and can hamper creativity and problem solving.

Research published by the American Psychological Association shows that there are two distinct processes involved:

Goal shifting – when you decide which task you are going to do.

Rule activation – where you turn off the rules for working on the first task and turn on the rules for the new task you are deciding to do.

Each stage takes up working memory. If you are multitasking, you are continually switching back

and forth between tasks and retrieving the rules for doing the new task and bringing them into working memory.

Your working memory is where your brain deals with all the bits of information it needs to handle a task at any one time. This capacity is finite. There is only so much working memory available and trying to use it on more than one task at a time simply means poor concentration, more errors, less creativity, and less focus on each task.

How to break the multitasking habit

A study conducted by the University of California found that it takes the average person 23 minutes and 15 seconds to get fully back on task after an interruption. Multiply that by the number of interruptions we experience daily and it's clear why there is a need for extended working hours.

To stop multitasking is much like breaking any habit. You have learned to multitask and now function more or less on automatic. So to break the habit, you need to become very conscious and deliberate in focusing on only one task at a time, says Holburn.

She suggests the following tips:

Be more aware and deliberate: Plan your time by writing down the tasks you need to do and allocate a time slot for each. Focus very deliberately on just doing that task during the time period.

Remove distractions: Turn your smartphone and email notifications off as this will tempt you to multitask.

Set aside time to address emails each day: Don't respond when they come in because it will steer your attention away from the task at hand.

Work quietly and in solitude: If you work in an open plan office schedule, some alone time in a private boardroom or wearing earphones indicates you don't want to be disturbed.

Deal with interruptions: If your phone rings or you are interrupted, stop the task at hand and return to it when you can give it your full attention.

When you catch yourself multitasking: Just stop. Don't carry on. Stop multitasking and go back to focusing on just one task. Strive to always focus on only one task at a time.

Reflect: At the end of each day, reflect on how well you have spent your time. If you haven't done as well as you would like to, don't beat yourself up, just carry on doing as well you can do the following day.

Keep working at it: Like any habit, you won't change it overnight. But if you keep planning to only do one task at a time and monitor yourself, eventually, focusing on a single task at a time will become your new habit.