

To Multitask or Not? A look at multitasking from both sides of the coin...

What is multitasking anyway? Is multitasking good or bad for us? Multitasking is one of those topics that we never seem to be able to decide on. Is it a positive attribute to boast about on résumés, or is it a risky habit that is harmful to those with **attention issues**? Are there areas in life—at home, in the office, in the classroom—where multitasking is OK, and others areas where it is not? Sure, multitasking can help us accomplish multiple items on a to-do list, but does doing multiple things at the same time affect our ability to do those tasks well?

And what about where students are concerned? Doing multiple tasks at a time must influence how they learn and the information that they retain...or does it?

Let's take a look at multitasking from a Pro-Con approach:

The PROs of Multitasking:

1. It is easy to switch **mental focus** when doing simple tasks, allowing people to do multiple things at once. For example: at home, talking on the phone while making dinner and sweeping the floor; At work, listening to radio, writing an email, talking on the phones.
2. Multitasking can help you learn how to deal with **distractions** and interruptions—because life doesn't stop happening just because you are busy.
3. Multitasking allows **progress** on multiple tasks, even if the progress is minimal. Helps move several projects/chores/assignments toward a single deadline.
4. Multitasking helps you develop the ability to **cope** when there is lots of commotion going on around you. It helps develop the ability to filter out the excess.
5. Society is continually more and more **technologically wired**. The ability to use multiple technologies simultaneously will keep people of all ages with adaptable, relevant, and employable.
6. When deadlines loom at the office and in the classroom, it is better to complete portions of all tasks, than to only complete one. In the classroom, part marks add up to **better grades** than no marks at all.

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The CONs Of Multitasking:

1. Tasks that require **deep concentration** are more difficult to switch between. Research shows that the actual act of switching between two things actually takes longer mentally. That's because our brain assigns rules to how we do something, and switching between tasks means closing one set of rules and opening another.
2. **Interruptions**—a ringing phone, the chime of an instant message—can disrupt train of thought making it difficult to return to the original task.
3. Multitasking often results in **busywork**—doing a lot, but accomplishing nothing. Whether in the office or in the classroom multitasking creates a drop in **efficiency**.
4. Constant distractions can lead to **frustration** and loss of attention. Instead of accomplishing much, very little gets done. Interruptions are especially difficult for children who have attention deficiencies and are only just learning how to activate their internal filtering mechanisms.
5. The more technologically savvy we become, the less we tend to use basic, old-fashioned **social skills**. Some companies are even taking an anti-technology stance and implementing email-free days to force employees to develop improved problem solving and teamwork.
6. Instead of using technology as tool to multitask, it is used as a distraction. What would appear to be multitasking is really **procrastination**. Ideally, multi-tasking should accomplish many tasks simultaneously but instead many projects end up half complete.
7. The **brain** is the ultimate multitasker. It computes millions of message from neurons at a single time. But just like any other muscle, it can be taxed and get tired. Known as executive function, the brain's ability to make multiple decisions can easily tire it out thus making it a less-effective decision maker.

This list is by no means complete, but, at this point, it seems that the cons of multitasking are just a little bit more heavily-weighted than the pros. As educators, Oxford Learning advocates that students, especially those with attention issues focus on a single thing at a time—at least until they develop the ability to filter out distractions and learn how to focus.

What do you think?