

## 9 Simple Productivity Tips to Avert Multitasking Mayhem!

By Ute Wieczorek-King, copyright May 2009

**Are you a busy woman who is an expert at multitasking and who can juggle a million and one things? Women, who run a business from home, tend to view their ability to multitask as a requirement to help them try and fit in everything that needs to be done. But is it actually helpful, or a hindrance to productivity?**

Mothers often seem to have a built-in ability and a need to complete several tasks at once. It may be a long time ago now, but I can still remember tending to a teething baby whilst keeping an eye on her toddler sister and overseeing the 7-year-old's homework, all the while thinking about what to have for dinner... and often preparing it as well! Add the phone call that interrupts all this activity and we may even manage that too.

Nowadays, we have clever technology to save us time and help us work better. Our smartphones, for example, enable us to access and pass on information whilst making coffee. When using instant online chat and voice over internet calls, it may be tempting to take part in a conference call with one person, and write email or instant messages to someone else, at the same time. After all, is this any harder than listening to the car radio whilst driving, or using driving time to catch up with colleagues or family via a hands-free mobile?

### **Multitasking may not be the key to higher productivity**

Fitting in multiple tasks seems to be our modern-day reaction to our need to achieve more in less time. However, we may not be working as optimally as we think - according to scientists, the brain doesn't process multiple tasks simultaneously in the way we think it does.



If I am writing this article in my office whilst listening to background music and people chatting in another room, it may seem to me that I am doing all this at the same time. However what really happens is that the brain is rapidly switching between the different tasks, rather than simultaneously processing them.

According to research\*, when doing more than one task, the brain orders them and decides which one to do at any one time. American Psychology professor, David E Meyer, claims that multitasking can slow us down, as the more complex activities a person takes on, the more time they actually take in the long run. And therefore, it may be difficult to perform several tasks together and each at an optimum level!

By choosing to work in this way we risk compromising the quality of our work and increasing the number of errors we make. We may even experience short-term memory problems or difficulties with concentration.

How many times have you rushed juggling two tasks, when something goes wrong and you suddenly find yourself with a third recovery task on your hand?

So whilst multitasking anything other than very simple, automated or routine tasks, it seems we are compromising our efficiency!

So what can busy business women do when under constant pressure to keep up with the different demands on their time?

**Here are 9 tips to help you 'maxi-task' rather than multi-task:**

1. **Accept** that multitasking may not be good for you -or your brain – it's a start!
2. **Work with your natural biorhythm.** Whether you are a morning or evening person, do your most important work tasks when you are most focused and productive.
3. **Stop reacting to everything that happens.** Responding appropriately may not mean having to jump straight into action just because something has landed on your desk or in your inbox, or because you 'should' be carrying out certain tasks at specific times.
4. **Always do the most important thing first;** this can take the pressure off you later, and also help with concentration.
5. When concentrating intensely during important tasks, it pays to **have a break after about 90 minutes.** This allows your brain to have a rest, as you continue with some less intense tasks. These may include answering e-mail or returning calls. Having a hot drink at this point may then also help you return to more intense 'focus time'.
6. During your 'focus time', **avoid distraction** from browser windows that don't need to be open, like any social networks you may use. **Turn email reminders** off, in fact why not close your inbox and even **put your mobile on silent.** Reducing other external noise (if possible) can help too, since your brain may thank you for not having to deal with interruptions, and you don't lose the adjustment time your brain needs to help you switch between tasks.
7. **Set a timer** for social networking tasks, or for reading articles (whether this is part of your work or not). Decide on a length of time before you start- just 15 minutes of totally focused time can be very effective.
8. If you are stressed by too much to do, it helps to **write everything down.** Particularly at night, when people often lie awake, feeling overwhelmed and anxious, taking notes of your concerns or writing a list can relieve your brain of some of the 'weight' and allow you to get the sleep that you need.
9. **Read a useful article about writing effective to-do lists** and how to prioritise tasks at <http://www.successnetwork.org.uk/articles.htm>

So, by using the old adage of 'more haste less speed' you will actually be improving your effectiveness and you may even find your overall work performance increasing.

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\* Sources: Dr. David Meyer, University of Michigan, mathematical and cognitive psychology professor and The Wall Street Journal, March 8, 2007

\* Article "the Multitasking generation" from Time Magazine  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1174696,00.html>  
<http://clearinghouse.missouriwestern.edu/manuscripts/815.asp>