

Multitasking taken to task

Efficiency experts are now advocating a one-track mind, writes SUE WHITE.

Anyone reading this while watching the kids play and stirring the porridge should prepare for a shock. While multitasking was once seen as a skill of the uber-efficient, experts now believe otherwise.

"Basically, saying that you are good at multitasking is acknowledging that you are really good at a very inefficient way of doing things," says performance educator and physiologist Dr Adam Fraser.

New neuroscience technologies have led scientists to conclude that while we may be able to do one or two simple tasks simultaneously, we aren't wired to multitask. It turns out we've been so wrong on this one that the very label is a misnomer: when we think we're multitasking, we're actually switching from one problem to another very quickly, a process known as "swaptasking".

While employers may still applaud it, they shouldn't: studies show that excessive swaptasking results in deteriorated performance because the strategic part of our brain, the neocortex, becomes exhausted.

"The brain has to deal with a whole flood of new information if someone interrupts while you're in the middle of writing an email," Fraser says. "It's thinking, 'This is Barry. Barry reports to me. What's happened recently to Barry?' and pulling forward huge amounts of data in a very short amount of time."

"Eventually, the sophisticated parts of the brain have enough and allow the primitive part of the brain to take over. You go into a mild form of survival mode, where you screw up by saying things or sending emails you wish you hadn't."

It's not only academics warning of the downsides of multitasking. American writer A. J. Jacobs discovered his attempts at unitasking struck a chord with readers of his latest book, *The Guinea Pig Diaries: My Life as an Experiment*.

While many of the month-long experiments documented in the book, such as living as a beautiful woman or following his wife's every whim for a month, may not have stuck, Jacobs still aspires to give multitasking the boot.

"Unitasking is a much better way to live in terms of productivity, happiness, stress reduction, you name it," he says.

Jacobs now relies on earplugs to reduce distractions and a computer program named Freedom to block his internet access while he's supposed to be focusing.

"I still multitask - it's a tough addiction to kick - but I do it much less than before



Illustration: Simon Bosch

the experiment," he says. His tip for aspiring unitaskers is to start slowly.

"The computer is the root of all multitasking evil. [You could] promise not to check your emails for 30 minutes, or make a phone call without surfing the net. Close your eyes so you actually listen to what the other person says."

A senior lecturer with the school of management at the University of Technology Sydney, Dr David Bubna-Litic, agrees slowing down has its merits.

He advocates the meditation practice of mindfulness to help tone down our mental acrobatics.

"Mindfulness allows us to engage more fully in the present moment by reducing the level of extraneous thoughts. People who do a lot of mindfulness practise would advocate cutting down on multitasking because it tires out the mind and reduces your ability to be mindful," he says.

Having meditated for more than 30 years, Bubna-Litic says mindfulness has had tangible effects on his own health and well-being.

"It's a really powerful way of managing my stress levels," he says. "When I stop, I notice my ability to be sensitive to others and pay attention is reduced," he says.

Naturally, the leap from multitasking whiz to mindful monotasker won't be instant. Mindfulness takes training (Bubna-Litic suggests starting with a course) and Fraser says monotasking comes easier to those who regularly clarify their purpose and control their environment by using earplugs or disciplining themselves to work solely on one task for a set time.

"Of course, some people believe our biggest distraction is ourselves. We lose focus, we get bored, so we interrupt someone or check our email. Unitasking is a skill you should practise," Fraser says.

Fact file

- Studies show multitasking is an inefficient way of using the brain.
- Unitasking (also known as monotasking) increases your productivity but relies on your ability to shut out distractions and set clear objectives for your time.
- Start slowly: work on one task for 30 minutes, perhaps wearing earplugs.