

Multitasking

Readers may have picked up from past comments that I have a healthy scepticism about multitasking. Here are a few thoughts.

Many women) believe that they are better than men at multitasking. This is difficult to prove because we have to try to somehow separate the necessary and unavoidable multitasking from the inherent inefficiency that comes with it. There are some suggestions that in some areas women may be better than men at multitasking, but it is difficult to find conclusive evidence. Also it is an issue of efficiency, which is not negated by there being no alternative to multitasking in looking after young children. We have to do it, but that does not make it efficient. If the aim is to get more done better in less total time, multitasking should be avoided if that is possible.

The Economist magazine recently identified three big worries about multitasking:

1. Too much information causes us to be stressed and leave a feeling that our life is out of control. This is backed up now by the discovery by scientists that multitaskers produce more stress hormones. This could be seen in conjunction with the issue of men versus women multitasking skills. Maybe women feel more stressed than me because they feel forced to multitask. Of course, in the modern workforce both men and women are also often forced to multitask. It then becomes a habit – if you ever travel by public transport, look around at how many people are habitually checking emails and messaging.
2. Multitasking works against creativity. Teresa Amabile of Harvard Business School found from studying 9,000 people that people are more likely to be creative if they are allowed to focus on something for some time without interruptions. Of course, mobile phones and tablet computers are inimical to focus without interruption.
3. Multitasking means we are less productive. David Meyer of the University of Michigan found that people who complete certain tasks in parallel take much longer and make many more errors than people who complete the same tasks in sequence. This one I have suspected for many years now, but at last we have some research evidence. I try always to work in a sequential fashion. Of course, it is not always possible that is why I said “try”. The more we succeed in this the more productive we will be.

Finally, for really sceptical readers, try this experiment in multitasking. Turn on a radio talk show and a little while later ask someone to read something. After they have read it ask what was said on the radio. It is not possible to multitask effectively like this. Please note that this is the same when reading with background music. Every time I do that, I find I can recall what I read, but I had not heard the music, or I heard the music but did not absorb what I had just mechanically read. Likewise, I may be reading something that triggers a thought about something I need to do. From that moment my brain is working out how I will do it, while I read mechanically and I soon realise that I have no idea what I had just read.

Finally, some years ago I did a postgraduate course. Although I took notes in the lectures, I also tape recorded them. When I replayed the tapes I was staggered how much I had not heard while I was writing down what had just been said. Maybe I am just a really poor multitasker, so I should try to avoid it. How about you?

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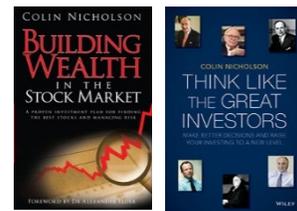
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