

BUSINESS TODAY

Stop all that multitasking, study suggests

Working Life

JUDITH TIMSON



nanosecond, the full force of his considerable intellect is focused on a task that I, on the other hand, perform while talking on my headset phone and mentally rewriting an article.

In fact, like most working mothers who think they invented multitasking, I've always been smug about my ability to, say, take a business call while feeding the kids. (Without, of course, yelling at an unsuspecting editor: "There's nothing wrong with that pasta; now eat it!")

But, apparently, without getting into scary terms such as "prefrontal lobe capacity," our brains need time to

switch from one activity to another. If we constantly "toggle" between activities, we never get up to flying speed or efficiency. People lose concentration when they switch tasks, sometimes up to 10 minutes at a time.

"You mean there's a reason we all feel like we have ADD (attention deficit disorder)?" asks one woman who runs her own marketing business. She confesses that sometimes, at the end of the day, "I feel as though I haven't done anything all that well."

This study will obviously come as a relief to her and to the rest of us, male or female, trapped in the multitask lane of life. Bosses routinely require us to do it all, teens constantly talk on line while doing their homework, and most of us, in the middle of a serious phone call, have heard the ubiquitous tap tap tap of the other person's computer keys. Hello? Is anyone out there still concentrating on a single task at a single time?

"We may be reaching the outer limits of our multitasking abilities," confirms David Meyer, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan

and co-author of the report.

The response to the study has been overwhelming, he adds, possibly because "most people are beginning to throw up their hands when confronted with yet another task that needs doing right away, and say, what the hell am I going to do now?"

One of the ironies of our modern age is that the technological devices created to make us more efficient — cellphones, Palm Pilots, the Internet — have almost forced us into the multitasking mode. The result is serious overload.

It hasn't taken us all that long to realize the more extreme implications of this. The hue and cry over cellphone use while driving will only grow louder as the crashes created by inattention increase. Hands-free phones are no solution, warns Meyer, because you're still losing an alarming amount of focus by talking while driving.

But what of the much vaunted ability of the wired younger generation to absorb it all and do it all simultaneously?

"I have to tell you, that's wrong," says Meyer. Even the teens in his

study who did their homework while doing something else were less efficient than they might have been.

The study was conducted in the early 1990s but was held up in the review process. So, it's fair to ask whether any new research shows that, in the face of all the technological changes, we may be able to rewire our brains to do more multitasking.

Nope, says Meyer. It's time we faced up to our limitations. The developers of even newer technology toys might want to take that into consideration.

If anything, as we become more educated about what the brain can and cannot do, we may end up gaining new respect for people who take the time to do one thing well before moving on to another task.

You mean there's a reason why my husband's shoelaces stay tied all day, while mine need retying? Enough with the toggling.

Judith Timson's column runs every second Tuesday. She can be reached c/o Business, 1 Yonge St., Toronto ON M5E 1E6, or by fax at 416-865-3630.

Multitaskers of the world unite!

You have nothing to lose but your mistaken belief that answering your e-mail while calculating your quarterly figures, all the while setting up a conference call and munching a tuna fish sandwich, makes you a modern-day efficiency machine.

According to a study released last week by the American Psychological Association, multitasking carries a hidden cost, both time and efficiency. The more complex the task, the higher the cost. Productivity can actually go down as a result of trying to do several things at once.

"In some cases, you could be wasting your employer's time," warns Joshua Rubinstein, who co-authored the study published in the *Journal Of Experimental Psychology*.

This discovery hits not only every business, but every household.

I have always been amused, for example, by the fact that my husband, who runs his own business, seems incapable of doing more than one thing at a time. Even when he ties his shoelaces in the morning, I see that for one