4 EVERYTHING MATTERS EQUALLY

"Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least."
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Equality is a worthy ideal pursued in the name of justice and human rights. In the real world of results, however, things are never equal. No matter how teachers grade—two students are not equal. No matter how fair officials try to be—contests are not equal. No matter how talented people are—no two are ever equal. A dime equals ten cents and people must absolutely be treated fairly, but in the world of achievement everything doesn't matter equally.

Equality is a lie.

Understanding this is the basis of all great decisions.

So, how do you decide? When you have a lot to get done in the day, how do you decide what to do first? As kids, we mostly did things we needed to do when it was time to do them. *It's breakfast time. It's time to go to school, time to do homework, time to do chores, bath time, bedtime.* Then, as we got older, we were given a measure of discretion. *You can go out and play as long as you get your homework done before dinner.* Later, as we became adults, everything became discretionary. It all became our choice. And when our lives are defined by our choices, the all-important question becomes, How do we make good ones?

Complicating matters, the older we get, it seems there is more and more piled on that we believe "simply must get done." Overbooked, overextended, and overcommitted. "In the weeds" overwhelmingly becomes our collective condition.

That's when the battle for the right of way gets fierce and frantic. Lacking a clear formula for making decisions, we get reactive and fall back on familiar, comfortable ways to decide what to do. As a result, we haphazardly select approaches that undermine our success. Pinballing through our day like a confused character in a B-horror movie, we end up running up the stairs instead of out the front door. The best decision gets traded for any decision, and what should be progress simply becomes a trap.

When everything feels urgent and important, everything seems equal. We become active and busy, but this doesn't actually move us any closer to success. Activity is often unrelated to productivity, and busyness rarely takes care of business.

"The things which are most important don't always scream the loudest."
—Bob Hawke

As Henry David Thoreau said, "It's not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is, what are we busy about?" Knocking out a hundred tasks for whatever the reason is a poor substitute for doing even one task that's meaningful. Not everything matters equally, and success isn't a game won by whoever does the most. Yet that is exactly how most play it on a daily basis.

MUCH TO-DO ABOUT NOTHING

To-do lists are a staple of the time-management-and-success industry. With our wants and others' wishes flying at us right and left, we impulsively jot them down on scraps of paper in moments of clarity or build them methodically on printed notepads. Time planners reserve valuable space for daily, weekly, and monthly task lists. Apps abound for taking to-dos mobile, and software programs code them right into their menus. It seems that everywhere we turn we're encouraged to

make lists—and though lists are invaluable, they have a dark side.

While to-dos serve as a useful collection of our best intentions, they also tyrannize us with trivial, unimportant stuff that we feel obligated to get done—because it's on our list. Which is why most of us have a love-hate relationship with our to-dos. If allowed, they set our priorities the same way an inbox can dictate our day. Most inboxes overflow with unimportant e-mails masquerading as priorities. Tackling these tasks in the order we receive them is behaving as if the squeaky wheel immediately deserves the grease. But, as Australian prime minister Bob Hawke duly noted, "The things which are most important don't always scream the loudest."

Achievers operate differently. They have an eye for the essential. They pause just long enough to decide what matters and then allow what matters to drive their day. Achievers do sooner what others plan to do later and defer, perhaps indefinitely, what others do sooner. The difference isn't in intent, but in right of way. Achievers always work from a clear sense of priority.

Left in its raw state, as a simple inventory, a to-do list can easily lead you astray. A to-do list is simply the things you think you need to do; the first thing on your list is just the first thing you thought of. To-do lists inherently lack the intent of success. In fact, most to-do lists are actually just survival lists—getting you through your day and your life, but not making each day a stepping-stone for the next so that you sequentially build a successful life. Long hours spent checking off a to-do list and ending the day with a full trash can and a clean desk are not virtuous and have nothing to do with success. Instead of a to-do list, you need a success list—a list that is purposefully created around extraordinary results.

To-do lists tend to be long; success lists are short. One pulls you in all directions; the other aims you in a specific direction. One is a disorganized directory and the other is an organized directive. If a list isn't built around success, then that's not where it takes you. If your to-do list contains everything, then it's probably taking you everywhere but where you really want to go.

So how does a successful person turn a to-do list into a success list? With so many things you *could* do, how do you decide what matters most at any given moment on any given day?

Just follow Juran's lead.

JURAN CRACKS THE CODE

In the late '30s a group of managers at General Motors made an intriguing discovery that opened the door for an amazing breakthrough. One of their card readers (input devices for early computers) started producing gibberish. While investigating the faulty machine, they stumbled on a way to encode secret messages. This was a big deal at the time. Since Germany's infamous Enigma coding machines first appeared in World War I, both code making and code breaking were the stuff of high national security and even higher public curiosity. The GM managers quickly became convinced that their accidental cipher was unbreakable. One man, a visiting Western Electric consultant, disagreed. He took up the code-breaking challenge, worked into the night, and cracked the code by three o'clock the following morning. His name was Joseph M. Juran.

Juran later cited this incident as the starting point for cracking an even bigger code and making one of his greatest contributions to science and business. As a result of his deciphering success, a GM executive invited him to review research on management compensation that followed a formula described by a little-known Italian economist, Vilfredo Pareto. In the 19th century, Pareto had written a mathematical model for income distribution in Italy that stated that 80 percent of the land was owned by 20 percent of the people. Wealth was not evenly distributed. In fact, according to Pareto, it was actually concentrated in a highly predictable way. A pioneer of quality-control management, Juran had noticed that a handful of flaws would usually produce a majority of the defects. This imbalance not only rang true to his experience, but he suspected it might even be a universal law—and that what Pareto had observed might be bigger than even Pareto had imagined.

While writing his seminal book *Quality Control Handbook*, Juran wanted to give a short name to the concept of the "vital few and trivial many." One of the many illustrations in his manuscript was labeled "Pareto's principle of unequal

distribution... .” Where another might have called it Juran’s Rule, he called it Pareto’s Principle.

Pareto’s Principle, it turns out, is as real as the law of gravity, and yet most people fail to see the gravity of it. It’s not just a theory—it is a provable, predictable certainty of nature and one of the greatest productivity truths ever discovered. Richard Koch, in his book *The 80/20 Principle*, defined it about as well as anyone: “The 80/20 Principle asserts that a minority of causes, inputs, or effort usually lead to a majority of the results, outputs, or rewards.” In other words, in the world of success, things aren’t equal. A small amount of causes creates most of the results. Just the right input creates most of the output. Selected effort creates almost all of the rewards.

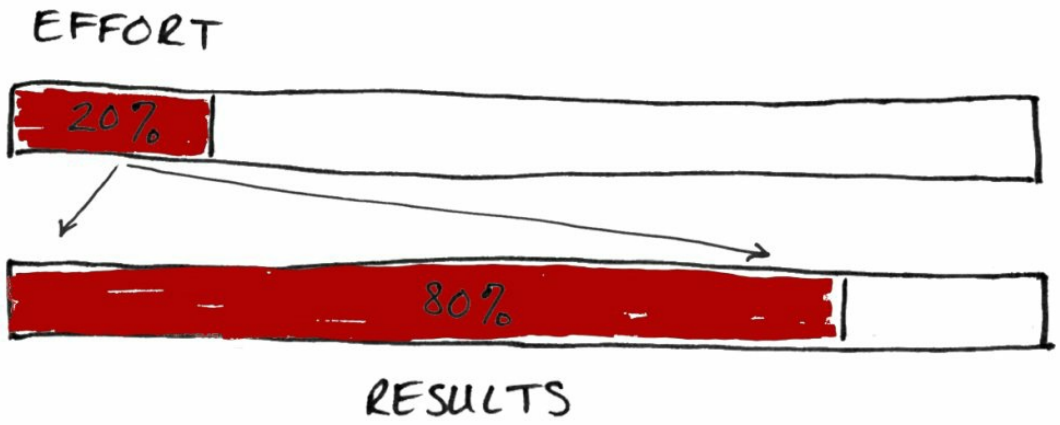


FIG. 3 The 80/20 Principle says the minority of your effort leads to the majority of your results.

Pareto points us in a very clear direction: the majority of what you want will come from the minority of what you do. Extraordinary results are disproportionately created by fewer actions than most realize.

Don’t get hung up on the numbers. Pareto’s truth is about inequality, and though often stated as an 80/20 ratio, it can actually take a variety of proportions. Depending on the circumstances, it can easily play out as, say, 90/20, where 90 percent of your success comes from 20 percent of your effort. Or 70/10 or 65/5. But understand that these are all fundamentally working off the same principle. Juran’s great insight was that not everything matters equally; some things matter more than others—a lot more. A to-do list becomes a success list when you apply Pareto’s Principle to it.

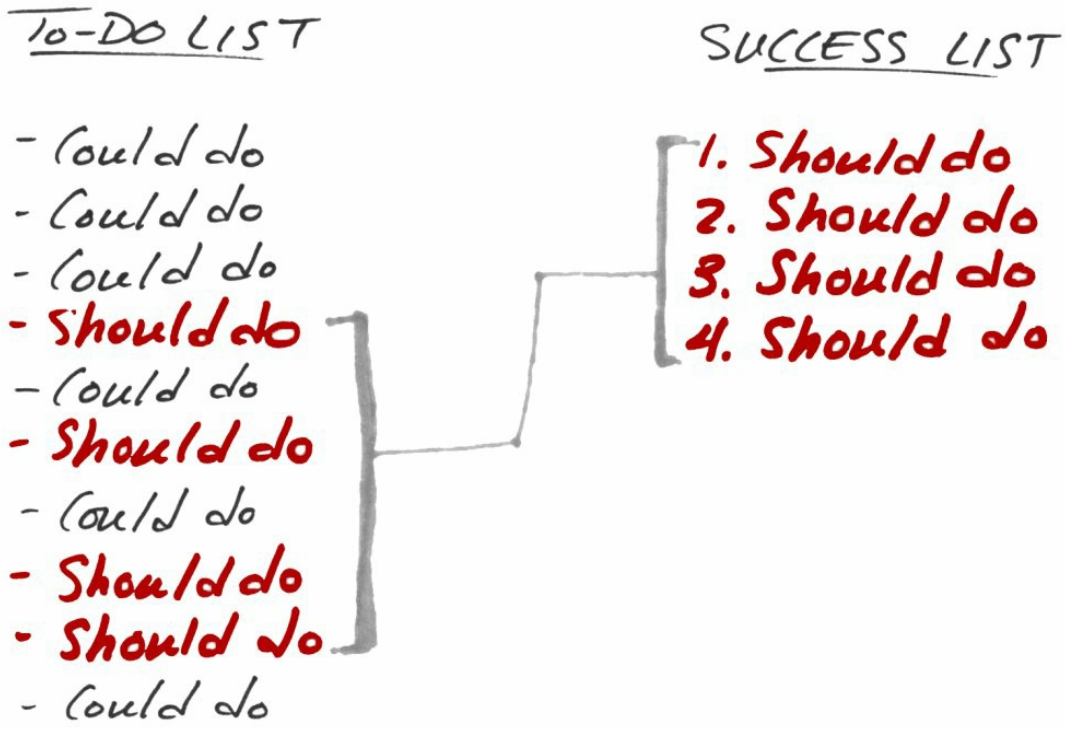


FIG. 4 A to-do list becomes a success list when you prioritize it.

The 80/20 Principle has been one of the most important guiding success rules in my career. It describes the phenomenon which, like Juran, I've observed in my own life over and over again. A few ideas gave me most of my results. Some clients were far more valuable than others; a small number of people created most of my business success; and a handful of investments put the most money in my pocket. Everywhere I turned, the concept of unequal distribution popped up. The more it showed up, the more I paid attention—and the more I paid attention, the more it showed up. Finally I quit thinking it was a coincidence and began to apply it as the absolute principle of success that it is—not only to my life, but also in working with everyone else, as well. And the results were extraordinary.

EXTREME PARETO

Pareto proves everything I'm telling you—but there's a catch. He doesn't go far enough. I want you to go further. I want you to take Pareto's Principle to an extreme. I want you to go small by identifying the 20 percent, and then I want you to go even smaller by finding the vital few of the vital few. The 80/20 rule is the first word, but not the last, about success. What Pareto started, you've got to finish. Success requires that you follow the 80/20 Principle, but you don't have to stop there.

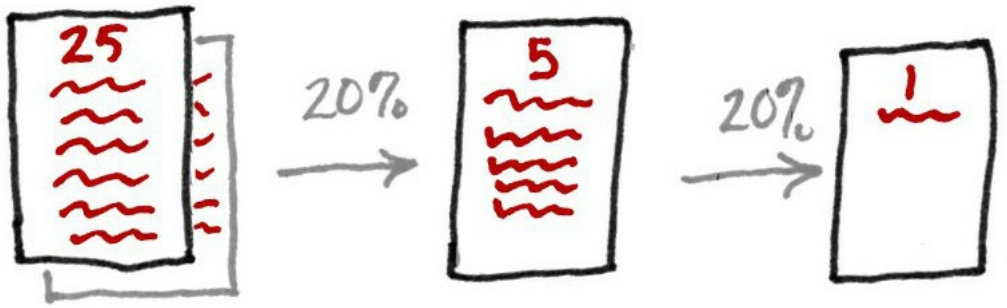


FIG. 5 No matter how many to-dos you start with, you can always narrow it to one.

Keep going. You can actually take 20 percent of the 20 percent of the 20 percent and continue until you get to the single most important thing! (See figure 5.) No matter the task, mission, or goal. Big or small. Start with as large a list as you want, but develop the mindset that you will whittle your way from there to the critical few and not stop until you end with the essential ONE. The imperative ONE. The ONE Thing.

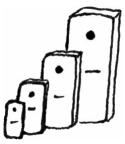
In 2001, I called a meeting of our key executive team. As fast as we were growing, we were still not acknowledged by the very top people in our industry. I challenged our group to brainstorm 100 ways to turn this situation around. It took us all day to come up with the list. The next morning, we narrowed the list down to ten ideas, and from there we chose just one big idea. The one that we decided on was that I would write a book on how to become an elite performer in our industry. It worked. Eight years later that one book had not only become a national bestseller, but also had morphed into a series of books with total sales of over a million copies. In an industry of about a million people, one thing changed our image forever.

Now, again, stop and do the math. One idea out of 100. That is Pareto to the extreme. That's thinking big, but going very small. That's applying the ONE Thing to a business challenge in a truly powerful way.

But this doesn't just apply to business. On my 40th birthday, I started taking guitar lessons and quickly discovered I could give only 20 minutes a day to practice. This wasn't much, so I knew I had to narrow down what I learned. I asked my friend Eric Johnson (one of the greatest guitarists ever) for advice. Eric said that if I could do only one thing, then I should practice my scales. So, I took his advice and chose the minor blues scale. What I discovered was that if I learned that scale, then I could play many of the solos of great classic rock guitarists from Eric Clapton to Billy Gibbons and, maybe someday, even Eric Johnson. That scale became my ONE Thing for the guitar, and it unlocked the world of rock 'n' roll for me.

The inequality of effort for results is everywhere in your life if you will simply look for it. And if you apply this principle, it will unlock the success you seek in anything that matters to you. There will always be just a few things that matter more than the rest, and out of those, one will matter most. Internalizing this concept is like being handed a magic compass. Whenever you feel lost or lacking direction, you can pull it out to remind yourself to discover what matters most.

BIG IDEAS



1. Go small. Don't focus on being busy; focus on being productive. Allow what matters most to drive your day.
2. Go extreme. Once you've figured out what actually matters, keep asking what matters most until there is only one thing left. That core activity goes at the top of your success list.
3. Say no. Whether you say "later" or "never," the point is to say "not now" to anything else you could do until your most important work is done.
4. Don't get trapped in the "check off" game. If we believe things don't matter equally, we must act accordingly. We can't

fall prey to the notion that everything has to be done, that checking things off our list is what success is all about. We can't be trapped in a game of "check off" that never produces a winner. The truth is that things don't matter equally and success is found in doing what matters most.

Sometimes it's the first thing you do. Sometimes it's the only thing you do. Regardless, doing the most important thing is always the most important thing.

5 MULTITASKING

"To do two things at once is to do neither."
—Publilius Syrus

So, if doing the most important thing is the most important thing, why would you try to do anything else at the same time? It's a great question.

In the summer of 2009, Clifford Nass set out to answer just that. His mission? To find out how well so-called multitaskers multitasked. Nass, a professor at Stanford University, told the *New York Times* that he had been "in awe" of multitaskers and deemed himself to be a poor one. So he and his team of researchers gave 262 students questionnaires to determine how often they multitasked. They divided their test subjects into two groups of high and low multitaskers and began with the presumption that the frequent multitaskers would perform better. They were wrong.

"I was sure they had some secret ability" said Nass. "But it turns out that high multitaskers are suckers for irrelevancy." They were outperformed on every measure. Although they'd convinced themselves and the world that they were great at it, there was just one problem. To quote Nass, "Multitaskers were just lousy at everything."

Multitasking is a lie.

It's a lie because nearly everyone accepts it as an effective thing to do. It's become so mainstream that people actually think it's something they should do, and do as often as possible. We not only hear talk about doing it, we even hear talk about getting better at it. More than six million webpages offer answers on how to do it, and career websites list "multitasking" as a skill for employers to target and for prospective hires to list as a strength. Some have gone so far as to be proud of their supposed skill and have adopted it as a way of life. But it's actually a "way of lie," for the truth is multitasking is neither efficient nor effective. In the world of results, it will fail you every time.

"Multitasking is merely the opportunity to screw up more than one thing at a time."
—Steve Uzzell

When you try to do two things at once, you either can't or won't do either well. If you think multitasking is an effective way to get more done, you've got it backward. It's an effective way to get less done. As Steve Uzzell said, "Multitasking is merely the opportunity to screw up more than one thing at a time."

MONKEY MIND

The concept of humans doing more than one thing at a time has been studied by psychologists since the 1920s, but the term "multitasking" didn't arrive on the scene until the 1960s. It was used to describe computers, not people. Back then, ten megahertz was apparently so mind-bogglingly fast that a whole new word was needed to describe a computer's ability to quickly perform many tasks. In retrospect, they probably made a poor choice, for the expression "multitasking" is inherently deceptive. Multitasking is about multiple tasks *alternately* sharing one resource (the CPU), but in time the context was flipped and it became interpreted to mean multiple tasks being done *simultaneously* by one resource (a person). It was a clever turn of phrase that's misleading, for even computers can process only one piece of code at a time. When they "multitask," they switch back and forth, alternating their attention until both tasks are done. The speed with which computers tackle multiple tasks feeds the illusion that everything happens at the same time, so comparing computers to humans can be confusing.

People can actually do two or more things at once, such as walk and talk, or chew gum and read a map; but, like computers, what we can't do is focus on two things at once. Our attention bounces back and forth. This is fine for computers, but it has serious repercussions in humans. Two airliners are cleared to land on the same runway. A patient is given the wrong medicine. A toddler is left unattended in the bathtub. What all these potential tragedies share is that people are trying to do too many things at once and forget to do something they should do.

It's strange, but somehow over time the image of the modern human has become one of a multitasker. We think we can, so we think we should. Kids studying while texting, listening to music, or watching television. Adults driving while talking on the phone, eating, applying makeup, or even shaving. Doing something in one room while talking to someone in the next. Smartphones in hands before napkins hit laps. It's not that we have too little time to do all the things we need to do, it's that we feel the need to do too many things in the time we have. So we double and triple up in the hope of getting everything done.

And then there's work.

The modern office is a carnival of distracting multitasking demands. While you diligently try to complete a project, someone has a coughing fit in a nearby cubicle and asks if you have a lozenge. The office paging system continually calls out messages that anyone within earshot of an intercom hears. You're alerted around the clock to new e-mails arriving in your inbox while your social media newsfeed keeps trying to catch your eye and your cell phone intermittently vibrates on the desk to the tune of a new text. A stack of unopened mail and piles of unfinished work sit within sight as people keep swinging by your desk all day to ask you questions. Distraction, disturbance, disruption. Staying on task is exhausting. Researchers estimate that workers are interrupted every 11 minutes and then spend almost a third of their day recovering from these distractions. And yet amid all of this we still assume we can rise above it and do what has to be done within our deadlines.

But we're fooling ourselves. Multitasking is a scam. Poet laureate Billy Collins summed it up well: "We call it multitasking, which makes it sound like an ability to do lots of things at the same time. ... A Buddhist would call this monkey mind." We think we're mastering multitasking, but we're just driving ourselves bananas.

JUGGLING IS AN ILLUSION

We come by it naturally. With an average of 4,000 thoughts a day flying in and out of our heads, it's easy to see why we try to multitask. If a change in thought every 14 seconds is an invitation to change direction, then it's rather obvious we're continually tempted to try to do too much at once. While doing one thing we're only seconds away from thinking of something else we could do. Moreover, history suggests that our continued existence may have required that human beings evolve to be able to oversee multiple tasks at the same time. Our ancestors wouldn't have lasted long if they couldn't scan for predators while gathering berries, tanning hides, or just idling by the fire after a hard day hunting. The pull to juggle more than one task at a time is not only at the core of how we're wired, but was most likely a necessity for survival.

But juggling isn't multitasking.

Juggling is an illusion. To the casual observer, a juggler is juggling three balls at once. In reality, the balls are being independently caught and thrown in rapid succession. Catch, toss, catch, toss, catch, toss. One ball at a time. It's what researchers refer to as "task switching."

When you switch from one task to another, voluntarily or not, two things happen. The first is nearly instantaneous: you decide to switch. The second is less predictable: you have to activate the "rules" for whatever you're about to do (see figure 6). Switching between two simple tasks—like watching television and folding clothes—is quick and relatively painless. However, if you're working on a spreadsheet and a co-worker pops into your office to discuss a business problem, the relative complexity of those tasks makes it impossible to easily jump back and forth. It always takes some time to start a new task and restart the one you quit, and there's no guarantee that you'll ever pick up exactly where you left off. There is a price for this. "The cost in terms of extra time from having to task switch depends on how complex or

simple the tasks are," reports researcher Dr. David Meyer. "It can range from time increases of 25 percent or less for simple tasks to well over 100 percent or more for very complicated tasks." Task switching exacts a cost few realize they're even paying.

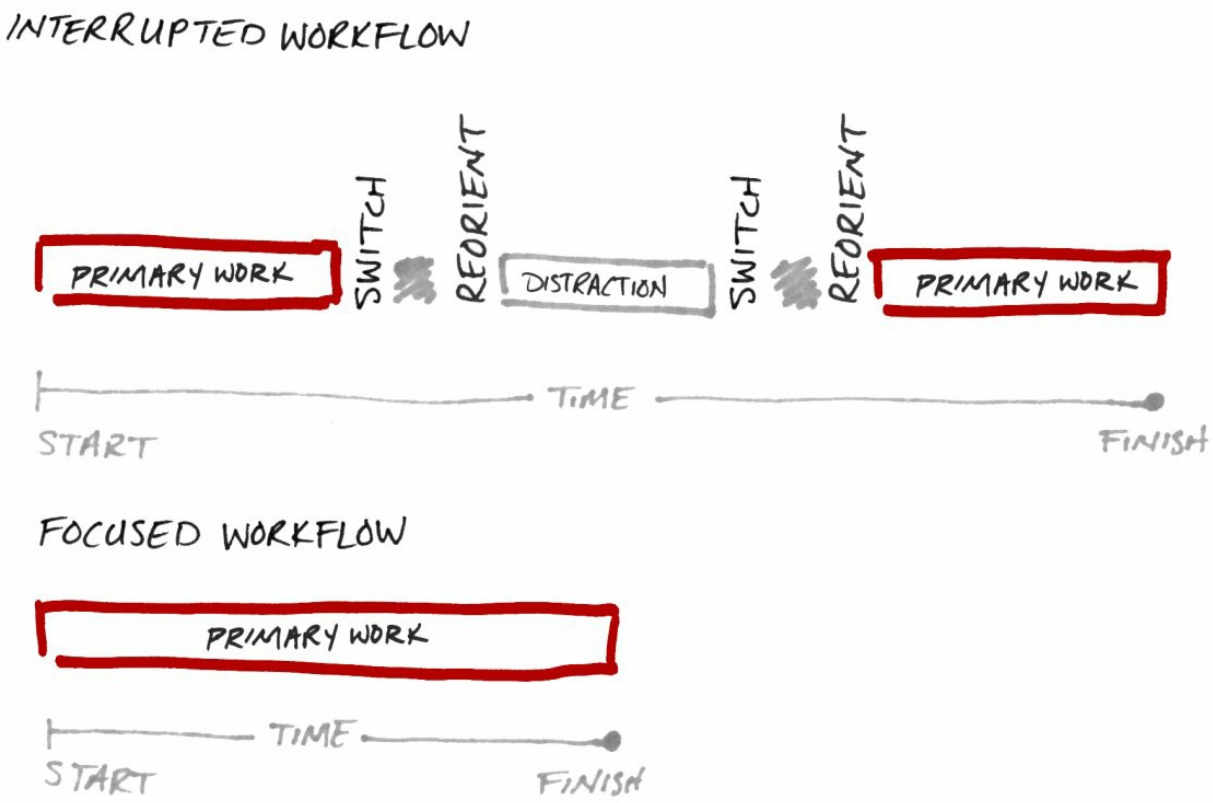


FIG. 6 Multitasking doesn't save time –it wastes time.

BRAIN CHANNELS

So, what's happening when we're actually doing two things at once? It's simple. We've separated them. Our brain has channels, and as a result we're able to process different kinds of data in different parts of our brain. This is why you can talk and walk at the same time. There is no channel interference. But here's the catch: you're not really focused on both activities. One is happening in the foreground and the other in the background. If you were trying to talk a passenger through landing a DC-10, you'd stop walking. Likewise, if you were walking across a gorge on a rope bridge, you'd likely stop talking. You can do two things at once, but you can't focus effectively on two things at once. Even my dog Max knows this. When I get caught up with a basketball game on TV, he gives me a good nudge. Apparently, background scratches can be pretty unsatisfying.

Many think that because their body is functioning without their conscious direction, they're multitasking. This is true, but not the way they mean it. A lot of our physical actions, like breathing, are being directed from a different part of our brain than where focus comes from. As a result, there's no channel conflict. We're right when we say something is "front and center" or "top of mind," because that's where focus occurs—in the prefrontal cortex. When you focus, it's like shining a spotlight on what matters. You can actually give attention to two things, but that is what's called "divided attention." And make no mistake. Take on two things and your attention gets divided. Take on a third and something gets dropped.

The problem of trying to focus on two things at once shows up when one task demands more attention or if it crosses into a channel already in use. When your spouse is describing the way the living room furniture has been rearranged, you engage your visual cortex to see it in your mind's eye. If you happen to be driving at that moment, this channel interference means you are now seeing the new sofa and love seat combination and are effectively blind to the car braking in front of you. You simply can't effectively focus on two important things at the same time.

Every time we try to do two or more things at once, we're simply dividing up our focus and dumbing down all of the outcomes in the process. Here's the short list of how multitasking short-circuits us:

1. There is just so much brain capability at any one time. Divide it up as much as you want, but you'll pay a price in time and effectiveness.
2. The more time you spend switched to another task, the less likely you are to get back to your original task. This is how loose ends pile up.
3. Bounce between one activity and another and you lose time as your brain reorients to the new task. Those milliseconds add up. Researchers estimate we lose 28 percent of an average workday to multitasking ineffectiveness.
4. Chronic multitaskers develop a distorted sense of how long it takes to do things. They almost always believe tasks take longer to complete than is actually required.
5. Multitaskers make more mistakes than non-multitaskers. They often make poorer decisions because they favor new information over old, even if the older information is more valuable.
6. Multitaskers experience more life-reducing, happiness-squelching stress.

With research overwhelmingly clear, it seems insane that—knowing how multitasking leads to mistakes, poor choices, and stress—we attempt it anyway Maybe it's just too tempting. Workers who use computers during the day change windows or check e-mail or other programs nearly 37 times an hour. Being in a distractible setting sets us up to be more distractible. Or maybe it's the high. Media multitaskers actually experience a thrill with switching—a burst of dopamine—that can be addictive. Without it, they can feel bored. For whatever the reason, the results are unambiguous: multitasking slows us down and makes us slower witted.

DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION

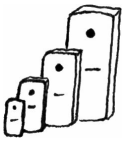
In 2009, *New York Times* reporter Matt Richtel earned a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting with a series of articles ("Driven to Distraction") on the dangers of driving while texting or using cell phones. He found that distracted driving is responsible for 16 percent of all traffic fatalities and nearly half a million injuries annually. Even an idle phone conversation when driving takes a 40 percent bite out of your focus and, surprisingly, can have the same effect as being drunk. The evidence is so compelling that many states and municipalities have outlawed cell phone use while driving. This makes sense. Though some of us at times have been guilty, we'd never condone it for our teenage kids. All it takes is a text message to turn the family SUV into a deadly, two-ton battering ram. Multitasking can cause more than one type of wreck.

We know that multitasking can even be fatal when lives are at stake. In fact, we fully expect pilots and surgeons to focus on their jobs to the exclusion of everything else. And we expect that anyone in their position who gets caught doing otherwise will always be taken severely to task. We accept no arguments and have no tolerance for anything but total concentration from these professionals. And yet, here the rest of us are—living another standard. Do we not value our own job or take it as seriously? Why would we ever tolerate multitasking when we're doing our most important work? Just because our day job doesn't involve bypass surgery shouldn't make focus any less critical to our success or the success of others. Your work deserves no less respect. It may not seem so in the moment, but the connectivity of everything we do ultimately means that we each not only have a job to do, but a job that deserves to be done well. Think of it this way. If we really lose almost a third of our workday to distractions, what is the cumulative loss over a career? What is the loss to other careers? To businesses? When you think about it, you might just discover that if you don't figure out a way to

resolve this, you could in fact lose your career or your business. Or worse, cause others to lose theirs.

On top of work, what sort of toll do our distractions take on our personal lives? Author Dave Crenshaw put it just right when he wrote, “The people we live with and work with on a daily basis deserve our full attention. When we give people segmented attention, piecemeal time, switching back and forth, the switching cost is higher than just the time involved. We end up damaging relationships.” Every time I see a couple dining with one partner trying earnestly to communicate while the other is texting under the table, I’m reminded of the simple truth of that statement.

BIG IDEAS



1. Distraction is natural. Don’t feel bad when you get distracted. Everyone gets distracted.
2. Multitasking takes a toll. At home or at work, distractions lead to poor choices, painful mistakes, and unnecessary stress.
3. Distraction undermines results. When you try to do too much at once, you can end up doing nothing well. Figure out what matters most in the moment and give it your undivided attention.

In order to be able to put the principle of The ONE Thing to work, you can’t buy into the lie that trying to do two things at once is a good idea. Though multitasking is sometimes possible, it’s never possible to do it effectively.