

MASTERS OF MULTITASKING



Wedding coordinator Stacy Saltzman, who works at A Perfect Event in Lakeview, says multitasking is

Doing multiple tasks at once has become second nature for some, but is that a good thing?

By Leonor Vivanco
REDEYE

Admittedly not a morning person, Jeremy Wicks sure stacks a lot on his breakfast plate.

He plugs in the iron and seconds later jams an English muffin into the toaster. He finishes ironing his shirt just as his toasted muffin pops up. Next, Wicks grabs his pants and throws them in the dryer to get the wrinkles out, just before he shoves the muffin in his mouth and grabs the leash to walk his dog around his North Center neighborhood.

All this before he heads downtown to work.

"That's probably my biggest time to multitask," said Wicks, a 29-year-old business consultant. "I hate the mornings, so I'm not willing to get up an hour earlier."

Although many people view multitasking, done by 85 percent of employed Americans according to a recent survey, as essential to productivity, some experts say it could damage the quality of work, be a time-saving illusion, create stress and hurt personal relationships.

And multitasking could be costly. Interruptions from work via non-essential e-mailing, Internet surfing and instant messaging cost U.S. businesses \$650 billion a year in lost productivity, according to Basex, a New York-based business research company. The cost includes time to return to the original task after being interrupted.

Technology has forced people to multitask, said event planner Stacy Saltzman, who works

COVER STORY

RITA REDEYE

Do you think multitasking makes you more or less productive? Tell us what you think by e-mailing ritaredeye@tribune.com. Please include your full name, age and neighborhood.



at A Perfect Event in Lakeview. She said she sends out 75 to 100 e-mails a day from her laptop that has six screens open at any given time as she waits on hold to confirm party details and glances at the menu order for a wedding.

"It's made it easy for distractions because you're on the phone, and your screen pops up that you have an e-mail; your Blackberry beeps," said Saltzman, 28.

Those distractions may not be a good thing, said Jenny Hoobler, assistant professor of management at UIC's College of Business Administration.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Wanted: Multitaskers

Job ads list multitasking as a desired skill, but experts warn that could be code for other issues at the workplace.

"Organizations are trying to find people who can do the most work in a certain amount of time, and multitasking sounds appealing," said Alice Stuhlmacher, associate professor of psychology at DePaul University.

"Whenever you're distracted, you're prone to making more mistakes," she said.

But Saltzman said multitasking is a crucial tool, especially in the workplace where young professionals are eager to climb the corporate ladder.

"It's expected that we have to multitask. We have to figure out how to get it all done and get it all done at the highest level," said Saltzman, who recently juggled planning two weddings, an opening party for a new Harry Winston store on Oak Street and the Chicago premiere

party for "Fred Claus." "I do better when I multitask. I feel like I get more accomplished," said Saltzman, who lives in Streeterville.

But listing multitasking in a wanted ad could signal a high-stress environment, Stuhlmacher said.

"An employer might want to use that word if they want to convey there's a lot of demands on someone," she said. Job candidates could be presented with multitasking scenarios to find out how you would prioritize work and family, said Jenny Hoobler, assistant professor of management at University of Illinois at Chicago.

"These scenario type-based questions are used as interviewing selection type tools," she said. [L.V.]

It's easy to get stressed out by—and hooked on—multitasking, experts said.

"It can almost amount to sort of obsessive compulsive behavior today with all the things that can tear us away from job tasks. It's almost an addiction for people," Hoobler said. "They have this nervous energy, and they're jumping from electronic device to electronic device." >>



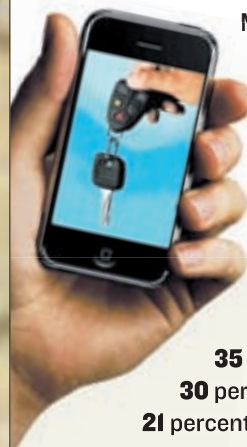
a crucial tool in the workplace. [BRIAN J. MOROWCZYNSKI PHOTO FOR REDEYE]

DRIVING AND PHONES DON'T MIX

The prevalence of cell-talking and texting while driving has made multitasking in the car a concern, with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reporting that distracted drivers account for almost 80 percent of crashes in the U.S.

Many states and cities, including Chicago, have banned using hand-held cell phones while driving, forcing drivers to use hands-free devices.

"We are a nation of people with too much to do and too little time. In fact, more than 80 percent of drivers surveyed identified themselves as multitaskers," Bill Windsor, associate vice president of safety at Nationwide Mutual Insurance, said in a news release in January when the company's survey results were released.



"However, driving requires significant attention. Multitasking while behind the wheel poses a threat to you and your fellow drivers."

Nationwide conducted a survey in 2006 that asked 1,200 drivers what they did behind the wheel. The survey showed 73 percent said they talk on cell phones. Other survey findings: [L.V.]

Respondents who said they always multitask in the car

- 35 percent of Gen Y-ers
- 30 percent of Gen X-ers
- 21 percent of Baby Boomers

Those who text or IM while driving

- 37 percent of Gen Y-ers
- 17 percent of Gen X-ers
- 2 percent of Baby Boomers

Types of multitasking behind the wheel

- 31 percent daydream
- 23 percent experience road rage
- 19 percent fix their hair, text or IM
- 14 percent comfort or discipline children
- 8 percent drive with a pet in their lap

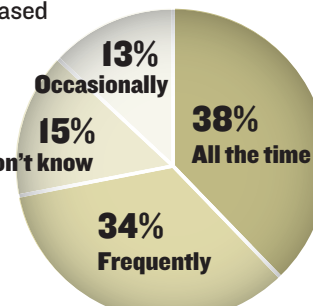
Other tasks mentioned include

- >> Changing seats with passengers
- >> Reading a book
- >> Watching a movie
- >> Writing a grocery list
- >> Nursing a baby
- >> Putting in contact lenses

BY THE NUMBERS

Eighty five percent of people multitask, and a majority believes they're good at it, according to a 2006 survey by Apex Performance, specialists in leader development and performance management, based in North Carolina. Here are some results of the survey of employees nationwide [L.V.]:

How often respondents said they multitask >>



Respondents who said they are good at multitasking

- >> 47 percent of women who completed high school
- >> 29 percent of men
- >> 50 percent of those holding postgraduate levels of education
- >> 28 percent of people
- >> 54 percent of employees earning more than \$75,000 annually
- >> 28 percent of those earning less than \$25K a year

>> It's not just at work where multitaskers are using tech tools.

At home, Wicks often has his laptop on the couch with him.

"I don't ever eat while not watching TV, and I actually e-mail while I'm eating," he said.

At times, multitaskers are caught text messaging while at lunch or dinner with friends. Relationships can be affected because multitasking in others' presence can signal that they are not as important as the other activity, said Alice Stuhlmacher, associate professor of psychology at DePaul University.

"People know when you're not giving them your attention," she said.

Multitaskers should consider whether the tasks are done as well as if done separately and whether doing all the tasks at once really saves time, Stuhlmacher said. Instead of multitasking, she suggests doing tasks in sequential order, delegating them to others, postponing them and considering whether they need to be done at all.

It can be difficult to multitask well depending on

how complicated the tasks are and how much concentration the tasks require, she said.

"You can be very productive if it's a task that's very easy for you or familiar. But if it's a new situation you're not familiar with or trained for, the quality of your work or your performance can suffer," Stuhlmacher said.

Multitasking, for some, can help get chores done in a short span of time.

Adam Godfrey, a 25-year-old human resources consultant, said he cleans his West Loop home as he does laundry, talks on the phone and watches TV.

It's those tasks, Stuhlmacher said, that are considered easy and don't require much attention.

"To the extent that TV might make it more pleasurable to fold the laundry, and you really don't need a lot of your brain capacity to do that, then multitasking is probably not going to be a detriment," she said.

And it may even help. "It makes me feel less like I'm sitting around doing nothing," Godfrey said.

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