

# Is multi-tasking an effective way to work?

When the word “multi-tasking” was coined, it referred to a computer that could run more than one program simultaneously. Now, multi-tasking evokes images of people scanning e-mail while talking on the phone, writing a report while listening in on conference calls or cooking dinner while supervising homework.

The key to success, we’re told, is how many different jobs we can complete at the same time.

But some experts say the more tasks we juggle—particularly unrelated tasks—the less efficient we become at performing any one task. What’s more, they argue, multi-tasking increases stress and may cause discomfort or health problems. What do you think?



**Find out more about this topic on the Web:**

- [www.familiesandwork.org/summary/overwork2005.pdf](http://www.familiesandwork.org/summary/overwork2005.pdf)
- [www.apa.org/releases/multitasking.html](http://www.apa.org/releases/multitasking.html)
- [www.fastcompany.com/online/63/multitasking.html](http://www.fastcompany.com/online/63/multitasking.html)
- [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1174696,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1174696,00.html)

## YES

from members:

**Elio Longo, Jr.**  
Waterbury, CT



Multi-tasking helps achieve optimal efficiency, and promotes continual learning and greater awareness of organizational purpose, unity and vision.

**Silvia Acosta**  
San Antonio, TX



Today's expectations and way of work demand it. We're more able to perform different tasks and maintain the ability to execute them when necessary.

**Tatiana Seregrina**  
West Des Moines, IA



It is mostly about focusing on major parameters: first, choosing the most important tasks; second, being realistic about an ability to handle them effectively.

## NO

from members:

**Shae Taylor**  
Chandler, AZ



Attention to detail and a willingness to give one's undivided attention is sadly lacking in today's society.

**Prasad Ayzola**  
Newark, DE



Multi-tasking results in less productivity, more stress. We need to focus on one task at a time for better results.

**Randy Sutak**  
Juneau, AK



A person can only effectively think of one thing at a time. Organize your tasks in a manner that allows focus and clarity, and speed through as needed.



from experts in the field:



**Emily Wilska** is the owner of The Organized Life ([www.organizedlife.org](http://www.organizedlife.org)), a San Francisco-based professional organizing company serving business and residential clients.

IN THE REAL WORLD, there will always be times when two (or more) things demand your attention at once. Here's how to do what you need to do efficiently and effectively.

**Set a time limit.** When you need to shift gears from one task to another—or to do two tasks at once—give yourself a deadline for returning to the original task. For example, if you receive an important phone call while you're in the middle of writing a proposal for a client, let the caller know you're able to talk for only 10 minutes; at the end of 10 minutes, politely but firmly end the call, making plans to follow up later if need be.

**Keep tabs on what you were doing.** Before shifting your attention away from the task you were working on, take a moment to note where you were, what your next step was going to be and where to pick up when you come back to the task. If you're pulled away from dinner prep by a child clamoring for your attention, for example, take a second to remind yourself that you were just about to move on to step three of your recipe; when you return to cooking, you'll know what's next.

**Use stop-loss measures.** At the very least, make sure multi-tasking doesn't undo any progress you've already made. Stop-loss measures—turning down the stove before answering the phone, say, or saving the document you're writing before chatting with the colleague who comes into your office—can help ensure that you don't wind up further back than where you were.

**Learn how to manage your time effectively.** In *Time Management from the Inside Out* (Henry Holt, 2004), author Julie Morgenstern proves that whatever your personality or work style, there's a time-management system for you. K.J. McCorry's *Organize Your Work Day in No Time* (Pearson Education, 2005) covers everything from setting daily goals to using technology wisely and managing your information intake. David Allen's *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (Penguin, 2001) is one of the most popular productivity books on the market for good reason: It sets out a simple, effective, easy-to-follow system for making the most of your time. **TM**

from experts in the field:



**Michelle M. Weil, Ph.D.** is a clinical psychologist, keynote speaker and consultant ([www.human-ware.com](http://www.human-ware.com)) and co-author of *TechnoStress: Coping with Technology@Work@Home@Play*.

THE MORE TASKS we learn, the less efficient we become at performing any one task. Moreover, the longer we go before returning to an interrupted task, the harder it is to remember just where we left off.

Laboratory research shows that multi-tasking increases stress, diminishes perceived control and may cause physical discomfort such as stomachaches, headaches and more. My own research on more than 35,000 people worldwide demonstrates that multi-tasking makes it ever harder to concentrate for extended periods.

You might notice that as you are working on one task thoughts about another creep into your consciousness. Another sign of what I call "multi-tasking madness" is the feeling that your memory is not quite as good as it used to be. You start working on something and then find yourself not being able to remember what you wanted to do or say.

Still another symptom is an inability to sustain a peaceful night's sleep or to enjoy what used to be calming, recreational times. Too many thoughts are buzzing in your head. In the end, multi-tasking madness diminishes your productivity and makes you work harder just to feel like you are barely keeping up with all your work.

How to stop the madness? First, try getting better at estimating the time it takes you to complete a task. Ask yourself how long it will take to download, read and answer your e-mail. Then check the actual time it takes. You'll generally find that you underestimated the time required. This discrepancy leads you to pile more expectations on yourself. You multi-task more and more, and soon you have way too much to juggle.

Second, develop an "external memory" to take some of the load off your brain. (An external memory can be as simple as a pad of paper where you list your tasks.)

Third, give yourself a chance to persevere on a task until completion. This is the most productive way to work. Eliminate such distractions as checking your e-mail frequently. Turn off the ringer on your phone and fax. Of course, you also have to learn to say no to tasks you don't have time to complete. Remember, technology can multi-task 24/7. You cannot. **TM**

What do you think?  
**Is multi-tasking an effective way to work?**

YES  NO

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

BUSINESS NAME \_\_\_\_\_

CITY/STATE/ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

**Four ways to vote:**

1. **Fax:** (425) 313-6718

2. **Mail: Debate**  
*The Costco Connection*  
P.O. Box 34088  
Seattle, WA 98124-1088

3. **E-mail: [debate@costco.com](mailto:debate@costco.com)**  
(Be sure to include your mailing address and phone number in your e-mail message.)



4. **Online:** Go to [costco.com](http://costco.com), then click on "Costco Magazine."

**Results in the next issue**

**DECEMBER DEBATE RESULTS:**

Should we eliminate the penny?



Opinions expressed are those of the individuals or organizations represented and are presented to foster discussion. Costco and *The Costco Connection* take no position on any Debate topic.