

Shaking the dust out of the sabre-tooth tiger-skin rug, cavewoman grabs a spearhead out of cavetoddler's mouth while turning the spit so the mammoth doesn't burn. She stops her two eldest fighting over a carved whale tooth before heading out for a forage, keeping an eye out for predators all the while knowing if she doesn't get everyone fur-clad and out soon, she'll miss all the best berries, and caveman will chuck a fit (he's known for that).

OK, so that might not be exactly how things played out 2.5 million years ago (cave paintings are somewhat patchy on detail) but according to academics, humans have been multitasking since we first decided to walk on two legs. And, as any modern woman will attest, it's something we've developed a talent for. In fact, over the past decade technological advancements have created more methods to allow us to multitask at every opportunity. We can conference call from a cliff top, email colleagues while watching *Newsnight*, and arrange our social lives while striding down supermarket aisles.

Sometimes it's hard to remember the last time we only did one thing.

Our ability to juggle countless tasks doesn't just help us battle through the to-do lists of modern life; it's also something that gives us pride. We talk about our multitasking prowess in job interviews and boast about how much we've got on to friends. "Multitasking has taken over our lives where it almost seems boring to do one thing," says life coach Chere Bork. "We complain about being busy yet it feels important. For many it's a badge of honour."

A WOMAN'S WORK

This pressure to perform five tasks at once is mostly felt by women. The media perpetuates the idea that women are innately better at multitasking so it follows that men can't (and therefore don't) multitask. Experts suggest that this could be due to our prehistoric roles where cavemen focused on hunting while cavewomen managed multiple responsibilities. But it's also because we make it look so easy; Margaret

Thatcher qualified as a research chemist and barrister before becoming prime minister, and survived on four hours' sleep a night to get more done. Hillary Clinton, a lawyer, senator, presidential candidate, then secretary of state, video-linked to a Whitehouse discussion on national security while planning daughter Chelsea's wedding.

However, the biggest pressure to multitask has sprung from changes in the way we work. "Work used to be rationalised with many single-activity roles, like typing pools or switchboard operators, where those employed would perform one key role. But over the years – largely due to the evolution of technology and skills – the office environment has changed," explains Katie Abbott, who coaches people into living a fulfilling life. The concept of multitasking – originally used to describe computers – became widespread in the late Nineties in reference to work. "Now, developments like the rise of social media add another layer to our work,"

"YOU'RE NOT MULTITASKING YOU'RE SWITCH TASKING - SWITCHING RAPIDLY BETWEEN EACH TASK"

says Abbott. "So on top of ploughing through emails, taking calls, and planning projects we may also be involved in raising our company's profile or analysing the latest trends. Our attention is split between hundreds of tasks, and it all adds up."

In the current climate, it's easy to see how this work pattern takes hold. Since 2008, there have been 3.7 million redundancies in the UK. Streamlined workplaces often mean remaining staff pick up the slack, plus the fear of being next for the chop can force us to take on every piece of work going. Stacey Nicholl, director of banking and financial services at HR company Communicate explains. "The recession has arguably made multitasking more important. Since many companies have reduced hiring, a multiskilled workforce means they can have fewer people, potentially saving salary and overhead costs."

FLAWED SYSTEM

But while it might be a modern day necessity, experts are now saying the benefits of multitasking are a myth,

arguing that not only is it an ineffective way to work, it's also bad for our health. Dave Crenshaw, business coach and author of *The Myth Of Multitasking* is one of them. "The word multitasking is inaccurate because you are not performing multiple tasks. You're actually switch tasking – switching rapidly back and forth between each task. As you do this you pay tiny 'switching costs.'" In a study done at Vanderbilt University in 2006, researchers used MRI scans to study what's actually going on in the brain when we multitask, concluding that when humans attempt to perform two tasks at once, execution of the first task usually leads to postponement of the second. One of the reasons for this is that similar tasks – like talking and emailing – compete to use the same part of the brain, so you can't physically concentrate on both.

While these mini-switches may only last seconds, it adds up. "When you multitask you are slowing down hourly," explains Crenshaw. "Ultimately tasks take around half to twice as long to do." A University of California study found that the average worker needs 25 minutes to return to their original task after an interruption, whether a phone call, email, or a visitor to their desk.

TIME WASTING

There's also evidence that multitasking actually makes us less intelligent – or work-stoned. When Dr Glenn Wilson, a psychiatrist at King's College London University, monitored the IQ of workers throughout the day, he found the average worker's IQ drops 10 points when multitasking, compared to four points when someone smokes marijuana. (Which may account for the in-office cake obsession.)

These shifts of focus also impact on our health. As Professor David Meyer professor of psychology at Michigan University explains, "Whenever demands exceed abilities, stress is bound to follow. Multitasking is especially stressful when tasks are important, as they often are at work. The brain responds by pumping out adrenaline and other stress hormones that put a person 'on edge.' These hormones provide a quick burst of energy, but don't make multitasking easier." Over time, the stress may even become

dangerous. "A steady flow of stress hormones can strain the body," Meyer says. "Studies have found that on-the-job stress can cause headaches, stomach trouble, and sleep problems, while chronic stress can lead to back pain, heart disease, and depression."

Multitasking can also affect our cognitive health. "Anytime you're trying to multitask, you have less attention available to store memories," Meyer says. "For example, a person who tries to read emails while talking on the phone will have a hard time retaining any of the information. Plus the flood of stress hormones unleashed by trying to do too much can actually cause permanent damage to the brain cells that store memories."

According to Dr Carol J Scott, corporate coach and writer of *Optimal Stress: Living In Your Best Stress Zone*, the continual demands on our attention are sapping our mental ability. "This endless barrage of data interrupts our train of thought and impacts on our ability to focus. And the constant onslaught of information robs us of our ability to devote time to more attentive types of thinking. Since the depth of our attention governs the depth of our memory and thought, multitasking can reduce our ability to understand. While we are able to do more when we multitask, we learn less."

A FINE BALANCE

So multitasking is ruining our brains and our health. Yet, we have to be realistic – the recession isn't going away soon – offices aren't going to be packed with willing and capable juniors, desperate to halve your workload nor are the men in our lives suddenly going to insist that they clean the curtains.

So where's the middle ground? Well, you can first identify your multitasking type and instigate small but significant changes in your routine to ease the pressure. Plus, there are ways to structure your day that work with your natural rhythms so that you don't push your brain into overdrive. But even more sensible is to ditch the sticky notes, admit that ferocious multitasking isn't productive, and discuss with your boss how to develop working patterns that don't rely on juggling of tasks.

This way, hopefully you don't end up pouring orange juice on your cereal, binning your presentation or sending a flirty email to the CEO. Unless, of course, you meant to.

THE PRODUCTIVE WAY TO



8 AM: READ TWITTER

According to a study of 509 million tweets sent over two years by 2.4 million Twitter users, this is when users are most likely to tweet upbeat, enthusiastic messages, and least likely to send downbeat tweets steeped in fear, distress, anger or guilt. "Sleep is refreshing" and leaves people alert and enthusiastic. Michael Walton Macy, sociology professor at Cornell University and co-author of the study, told *The Wall Street Journal*.



9 AM - 11 AM: TACKLE A BIG PROJECT

Between these hours, your brain contains moderate levels of stress hormone cortisol, which has been proven to sharpen concentration.

"As long as you're ignorant of everything else that's going on outside, you can concentrate on what you want to work on," says career coach Sid Savara. If you start checking emails, you will move on to one of a million other things that are probably less important."



11 AM - MIDDAY: UNDERTAKE DIFFICULT TASKS

When it comes to doing cognitive work, most adults perform best in the late morning, says Dr Steve Kay, a professor of molecular and computational biology at the University of Southern California. "As body temperature starts to rise just before awakening in the morning and continues to increase through midday, working memory, alertness and concentration gradually improve."



MIDDAY - 1 PM: CHECK EMAILS

According to recent research led by Dr Robert Matchock, an associate professor of psychology at Pennsylvania State University, most people are more easily distracted from noon to 4pm, and the ability to focus and concentrate typically starts to slide. This is a good time to build in some low value tasks like checking and replying to emails – just focus on the most important ones first, and take 15 minute breaks.



1 PM - 2 PM: TIME TO GET ACTIVE

According to a University of Bristol study, 79% of workers say their mental and interpersonal

WHAT KIND OF MULTITASKER ARE YOU?

Tick the statement that most closely applies to you. Then read on to find out your multitasking type, how to make it work to your advantage and abolish the need for sticky notes ever again

1 When a colleague asks you how your day is going, you'll typically respond

- "I'm busy"
- "OK... I think"
- "Good, how's yours?"

2 How do you generally feel when you're at work?

- Valued and important
- Never quite on top of things
- Calm and in control

3 How would your colleagues describe you?

- The go-to person
- Slightly scatty or emotional
- Solid and stable

4 You believe that multitasking is

- One of your greatest strengths
- A necessary evil
- Something to be avoided

5 When someone asks you to take on extra work do you

- Agree – you'll fit it in somehow

- Agree – you don't want to look like you can't cope
- Doublecheck your workload

6 When you don't know how to do something you

- Try to work it out yourself from past experience
- Give it a shot – other people manage
- Get advice before you begin

7 How often do you check your phone/texts/emails?

- Intermittently throughout the day
- All the time, whatever you're doing
- At set periods in between other tasks

8 How often do you delegate tasks?

- Never – it's better and quicker to do it yourself
- Sometimes – you don't need to do everything
- Often – it's the quickest way

9 How invaluable do you think you are?

- You're the backbone of the office
- You have definite strengths and weaknesses
- You're a key part of the team

10 Your diary is

- Filled to the brim with appointments and detailed notes
- Something you only use sporadically
- Equally filled with appointments and free time

11 When you're off work, you think

- "I hope they can cope without me."
- "I hope I remembered to hand over everything."
- "I hope everything goes well with the project."

12 When you've got an urgent deadline you

- Are still caught up with can't-miss meetings
- Suddenly remember something key you've missed
- Turn off your phone, go somewhere quiet and focus

STRUCTURE YOUR DAY

performance was better on the days that they exercised, while 74% said they managed their workload better. Even a brisk walk to the shops will help you bust stress and re-energise.



2PM - 3PM: POST-LUNCH MICRO-NAP

According to Dr Matchock,

your alertness slumps after eating a meal and sleepiness also tends to peak around 2pm making this the ideal time for a nap – from your body's point of view if not your employers. However, according to Suzanne Selvester from Libratum, an organisation aimed at improving productivity through stress management, "Even taking 15 minutes somewhere private, away from your desk, where you can close your eyes and relax can completely refresh the mind."



3PM - 4PM: MANAGE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA

If you want your

tweets to be re-tweeted, the best time to post them is between 3pm and 6pm, says social media scientist Dan Zarrella. "This is when many people lack the energy to share their own tweets and turn to relaying others."



4PM - 5PM: ORGANISE A MEETING

According to Erin Falconer, editor-in-chief

of self-improvement website pickthebrain.com, "Towards the end of the working cycle, the mind is so cluttered and drained that workers resort to 'work-related activities' that appear productive but don't actually contribute anything." This is a good time

for some interaction with colleagues – get away from your screen and have a brainstorm instead, or just catch up and set goals for the next day.



5PM: LEAVE EARLY AND WORK LATER

According to

a 2011 study at Michigan's Albion College, for most adults, problems that require open-ended thinking are often best tackled in the evening when they are tired. When 428 students were asked to solve problems requiring original thinking, their performance was much improved after 8pm. Dr Mareike Wieth, who led the study, says that being tired "may allow the mind to wander more freely to explore alternative solutions."

it's five minutes every hour this will be less expensive time-wise. And instead of allowing people just to come up to your desk, arrange one-on-one meetings for important questions." You also need to shift – rather than split – your focus, as Taylor explains. "When you're writing an email and a colleague comes over, give the person your full focus – it communicates that you're in control."

- ◆ Invest in a diary: set a goal of using it for a month – it only takes 21 days to form a habit.
- ◆ Have an e-blackout: set strict time periods when you can't check your phone and email. Set a response suggesting people call your landline if it's urgent.
- ◆ Be present with people: don't split your attention – it makes people feel devalued.

THE ZEN SINGLE TASKER

Mostly Congratulations – you're a calm, focused single-tasker. "You know that by doing less at once you can get more done," says Crenshaw. "You use a calendar but leave lots of space because you know interruptions happen. And

13 Do you ever take work home with you?

- Yes – you're happy to put in extra hours
- Sometimes – it's your only chance to get it done
- Never – you're rarely that behind

14 Your boss would like you to work on

- Training up staff
- Your organisation
- Managing other people

15 Your biggest work worry is

- Whether people have actually done what I asked them
- Missing something key
- Other people's working methods

16 When you get a phone call you...

- Take it whatever you're doing
- Take it, and keep writing emails
- Stop what you're doing to take it

17 Do you find it hard to focus on one task?

- Sometimes, they're all important
- Yes, you're easily distracted
- No, you prefer to work that way

18 How often do you finish a deadline ahead of schedule?

- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Often

19 What do you find most difficult at work?

- Finding a window
- Staying on top of things
- You find most things fairly easy

20 How well can you switch off from work?

- I don't want to switch off
- It pops into your head sometimes
- Well – rest time is important

it would take too long. But freeing up your schedule to train someone will save you time in the future." And as executive coach Ros Taylor suggests, you'll benefit from occasionally saying no. "At work we want to be liked – but it's not everything. Smile and refuse nicely, suggesting someone else who can help. By having gaps in your schedule, you'll have time to deal with any unexpected problems."

- ◆ Delegate tasks: training someone will result in time savings.
- ◆ Create schedule gaps: windows of 15 to 30 minutes between meetings will allow you time to do tasks so you don't fall behind.
- ◆ Practise single focus: concentration is a mental muscle. Exercise it by making yourself stick to one task for 30 minutes.

THE ACCIDENTAL MULTITASKER

Mostly You don't like multitasking, but think it's the only way to cope with your workload. You won't use technology in a productive way – you don't use an online diary – but you are easily distracted. "Turn off message notifications, and put your phone on silent," says Crenshaw. "Set a time to check and reply – even if

"YOU STRUGGLE TO DELEGATE BECAUSE YOU FEEL THAT NO-ONE ELSE WILL DO THE TASK AS WELL"

because you give tasks your full focus you typically underspend time, you miss out on any last-minute stress." While your approach is the healthiest and most productive, Crenshaw suggests building in 'background tasking' to maximise your efforts. "Set off a print run while you answer your emails. This boosts efficiency without any cost to your work or your health."

- ◆ Feel free to work alone: if you have an important task that needs completing quickly, set aside your allotted time and find a quiet corner with zero distractions.
- ◆ Do background tasking: combine an activity that requires your attention with one that doesn't.
- ◆ Share your skills: colleagues who aren't organised can impact on you. Share your strategies.

RESULTS

THE PROUD MULTITASKER

Mostly "Being busy gives you a sense of importance, and makes you feel valuable," Dave Crenshaw says. "You struggle to delegate because you feel no-one will do the task as well, and aren't willing to train anyone else, because you feel