

September 2010: You Are Not A Computer

Key Takeaways:

- ✍️ Finish what you start: it's nearly impossible (and stressful) to track multiple incomplete tasks
- ✍️ Stay focused: you can't process more than one thing at a time

Here's a screenshot from a client's computer. What's wrong with it?



Let's count the windows: 1...2...3...7. We've got three email messages, two Word docs, a spreadsheet, and a Powerpoint presentation open all at once. I'm guessing that had I not announced my arrival, we'd probably have found a game of Solitaire, updates on the Yankees game, and two different flight reservations for a trip to Poughkeepsie, too. And though this client really is pretty good at his job, he still puts his pants on one leg at a time. Which is to say, he can only work on one item at a time.

Interestingly, as we were going through this mess o' windows, he realized that he had forgotten about some of them. One of the email messages was from early in the morning — he never finished writing the email before getting distracted by something else. And another email he had no idea about at all. He addressed it, but wasn't sure why he was writing to that person.

You've probably read volumes about the inefficiency of multi-tasking. Maybe you didn't believe it. But this screen shot shows pretty convincingly how difficult it is to perform multiple tasks simultaneously.

It's so easy to get sucked into the vortex. With so many responsibilities to shoulder and so many damn emails to trudge through, it's tough to tell the world to stop. Those tasks don't just line up and patiently await their turn to bask in the warm glow of your attention — and neither do their owners. No, they howl and scream for your love — and when you don't give it to them, you get a phone call or (just what you need) another email, or the initiator of that task drops by your office to find out the status of the new paper clip recycling program.

But opening up all those windows in the hopes of getting all those things done more quickly is a mirage. Your computer is good at running all those programs simultaneously.

You, unfortunately, are not.

You'll be far better off by establishing the discipline of finishing what you start. Whether it's a spreadsheet or an email, a 30-minute task or a 30-second one, one of the keys to productivity and performance is having the discipline to stay focused on one task and seeing it through to completion.

Working this way will feel weird. After all, in a world where people actually brag about their multitasking, and job descriptions specifically demand "the ability to multi-task in a high-energy environment," you're going to seem downright quaint by shifting to serial tasking. (Note: this does not mean that you have to give up your Blackberry and switch to a rotary phone.)

Try to get past the fear that your work will metastasize and destroy you if you don't attend to it for a nanosecond before switching to the next item on your to-do list. It won't. Unless you're performing open-heart surgery, or stationed in a nuclear missile silo, most likely those tasks can wait. Even for just a bit. In fact, you'll actually get more things done if you stay focused.

And, not incidentally, you'll do a better job, too.