Multitasking mania

It seems like it saves time, but the chaos that ensues often argues otherwise. Perhaps it's still true that a job worth doing is worth doing well.

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It seems that multitasking saves time. But as more things that are done at once, more time seems to be devoted to multitasking. It apparently makes life faster, yet yields a hectic energy that can actually slow you down, increasing the chances of mistakes

MULTITASKING has become the modern mania, even though it has a dark side: It leaves room for error and often leads to sub-par performance.

We are more error-prone when we multitask. As the multitaskers take up more than one task at a time, they are unable to focus and perfect any single task as their attention is divided among the chores. As the quality of our work deteriorates, it adds extra costs, because things need to be fixed.

Do one thing at a time and do it well -- this age-old piece of advice was once handed down from generation to generation. Yet modern life no longer waits gently for us to finish one task before sending another our way or offers abundant time for many chores.

According to research, there are many ways in which multitasking is inefficient or even harmful.

Multitasking actually degrades short-term memory, not just for the topics being multitasked but by impacting areas of the brain. It creates stress, and stress invokes the more primitive parts of the brain that are linked with personal safety, pulling energy from the more modern parts involved with higher-level thinking. Stress can also damage cells needed for new memories.
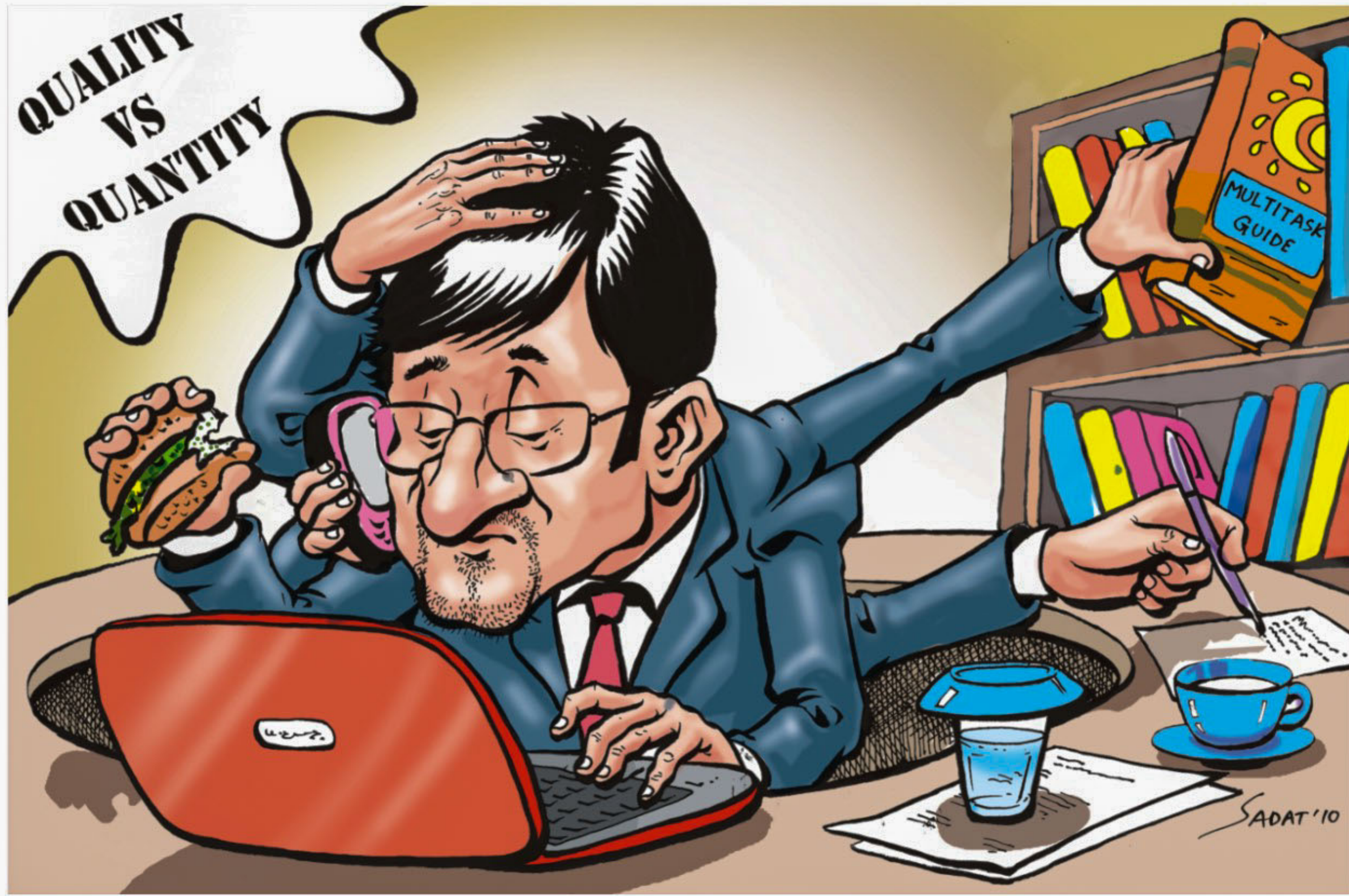
Some parts of the brain are sequential processors; they can accept only one input at a time.

The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain used for complex cognition and decision-making, is the biggest energy consumer. Additional loads from multitasking will quickly deplete cognitive ability.

Have you ever been in a bus when it made an abrupt start or stop, or tried to get on or off a moving bus? In both cases, your body takes time to get used to the sudden change of momentum. Without the time to get adjust to the sudden change or something to hold on to, you may lose your balance and fall over.

This demonstrates the first law of motion of Isaac Newton: A body at rest remains at rest, and one in (uniform rectilinear) motion stays in motion unless acted on by an external force. This law is known as the law of inertia.

The mind is not so different, though it works by associations. The term "train of thought" is apt, as the mind follows a track, most often a track it has traced before, and can move with force. Switching the mind suddenly from one track of thought to another needs requires slowing down the train before moving to the other track. When a train of thought is not slowed to a near stop before an abrupt switch, it derails. The more incongruent the tasks are, the greater the effort to switch from thought to thought.

According to Madeline Bunting, author of Willing Slaves, "employees have been trained to do more than one job, so that if a machine breaks down or there is a delay in stock arriving, they can do something else and then turn back to the original job. The aim of multitasking was to ensure a continuous workflow and no time is wasted waiting at the employee's expense."

The computer led to a new crisis as it comes to multitasking. Before the LCD window on the world, we now surf the internet, write emails, read news headlines, and check sports scores while working on a project and talking on the telephone -- often while watching a nearby TV and snacking.

It seems that multitasking saves time. But as more things that are done at once, more time seems to be devoted to multitasking. It apparently makes life faster, yet yields a hectic energy that can actually slow you down, increasing the chances of mistakes, according to David Meyer of Michigan University: "Disruptions and interruptions are a bad deal from the standpoint of our ability to process information."

A core limitation is the generally mythical ability to concentrate on two things simultaneously, according to Jonathan Sinton, the business strategy director for Research International. People have a hierarchy of focus, he says: "They will be concentrating on one task over the other."

Jumping from task to task without finishing any task perfectly leaves room for mistakes. Nina Sunday of Brainpower Training agrees says there is no such thing as multitasking; efficiency in the workplace depends on prioritising tasks, not jumping from one to the other. Her training on time-management skills suggests writing and tracking a to-do list; staying focused on the next most important thing to do; and focusing on high-value tasks ahead of low-value tasks.

Although multitasking always seems like it would save time, the chaos that ensues generates other problems that can at times be greater. After all, a job worth doing is worth doing well.

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The power of PowerPoint

STAR BUSINESS DESK

IN a business meeting, PowerPoint can be both persuasive and provocative.

Many consider the values of PowerPoint as a strong business tool, and there are others who think it is a drag on effective interaction -- that it sometimes confuses and even mars communication.

But, any discussion of PowerPoint's merits and miscues merely illustrates the importance of using the program to best advantage. Here are some ways to use the program to help make your presentation look brilliant.

Hold up your end with compelling material

In a way, PowerPoint's ease of use may be its own worst foe. However simple and good-looking it can be to build eye catching slides and graphics, bear in mind that PowerPoint is not self-sufficient. The viewers have come to hear you, not merely to stare at images on the screen. Build a strong PowerPoint program, but make sure that your spoken remarks are no less compelling. PowerPoint doesn't give presentations -- PowerPoint makes slides. Remember that you are creating slides to support a spoken presentation.

Keep it simple

The most effective PowerPoint presentations are simple --charts that are easy to understand, and graphics that reflect what the speaker is saying.

Some authorities suggest no more than five words per line and no more than five lines per individual slide. Don't gum up the works with too many words and graphics.

Minimise numbers in slides

PowerPoint's lure is the capacity to convey ideas and support a speaker's remarks in a concise manner. That's hard to do through a haze of numbers and statistics. For the most part, most effective PowerPoint displays don't overwhelm viewers with too many figures and numbers. Instead, leave those for a later, more thorough digestion in handouts distributed at presentation's end.

Don't parrot PowerPoint

One of the most common and harmful habits of PowerPoint users is to simply read the visual presentation to the audience. Not only is that superfluous -- short of using the clicker, why are you even there? But it makes even the most visually appealing presentation uninteresting. PowerPoint works best with spoken remarks that augment and discuss, rather than mimic, what's on the screen. Even with PowerPoint, you've got to make eye contact with your audience -- those people didn't come to see the back of your head.

Time your remarks

Another possible land mine is a speaker's comments that match exactly with the look of a fresh PowerPoint slide. That merely splits your audience's concentration. A well-orchestrated PowerPoint program brings up a new slide, gives the audience an ability to read and digest it, then follows up with remarks that broaden and amplify what's on the screen. It's an issue of timing. Never talk on top of your slides.

Give it a rest

PowerPoint is most effective as a visual accessory to the spoken word. Experienced PowerPoint users aren't shy about letting the screen go blank on occasion. Not only can that give your audience a visual break, it's also effective to focus attention on more verbally-focused give and take, such as a group conversation or question and answer session.

Use lively colours

An outstanding difference between words, graphics and the background can be very effectual in conveying both a message and feeling.

Import other images and graphics

Don't limit your presentation to what PowerPoint offers. Use exterior images and graphics for diversity and visual plea, including video. It helps with humour, conveys a message and loosens up the crowd.

Distribute handouts at the end -- not during the presentation

Some people may differ with me here. But no speaker wants to be chatting to a crowd that's busy reading a summation of his or her remarks. Unless it is burning that people follow a handout while you're presenting, wait until you're done to distribute them.

Edit well before presenting

Never lose the viewpoint of the viewers. Once you're finished drafting your PowerPoint slides, take for granted that you're just one of the folks listening to your comments as you analyse them. If something is unattractive, off-putting or puzzling, edit ruthlessly. Chances are good your overall presentation will be the better for it.

Compiled from Microsoft Business Office

A well-orchestrated PowerPoint programme brings up a new slide, gives the audience a chance to read and digest it, then follows up with remarks that broaden and amplify what's on the screen