

Masters of multitasking fall short in Stanford study

By Lisa Fernandez
lfernandez@mercurynews.com

Posted: 08/26/2009 05:07:08 PM PDT

Updated: 08/27/2009 03:07:58 PM PDT

Related section

- [Health news, forums and](#)

Hey, concentrate for a second here. We know you think you can simultaneously text your boss, e-mail your girlfriend, post a school photo to your Facebook page and shop for shoes online better than doing it the old-fashioned way — one task at a time.

Sorry. A team of Stanford University researchers says you can't.

More specifically, the team found that people who are HMM (heavy media multitasker in research parlance) do not pay attention, cannot control their memory or cannot switch easily from one job to another as adeptly as low-tech people who concentrate on one job at a time.

"I found it very surprising," said Eyal Ophir, the study's lead researcher at Stanford's Communication Between Humans and Interactive Media Lab who is admittedly a one-thing-at-a-time kind of guy. "We thought that multitaskers would have some kind of special ability. All we found were deficits."

Susan Mernit, 50, who grew up in Palo Alto and is a self-described compulsive multitasker, was not part of the study. But reached at her new home in

Oakland where she was talking on the phone, reading the mail and discussing business with her partner, she disagreed with the findings. A founder of a community nonprofit as well as a Web strategist (since she can do at least two things at once), Mernit said, "I believe people can give partial attention to one thing and focus on another. I'm really good at that. And I don't think my brain has gotten any mushier."

But Mernit may be deluding herself into thinking her brain is operating at full capacity, according to the Stanford study, also written by Clifford Nass and Anthony Wagner, published in Monday's edition of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The researchers studied 100 people: Those who regularly multitask using media, and those who don't. Then using computerized colored shapes, alphabetical sequences and other tests that set out to prove memorization, sorting and organizational skills, the researchers found that heavy multitaskers did worse than their low-tech counterparts every time.

"High multitaskers can't keep things separate in their minds," Ophir said.

The remedy?

"Try to do less," Ophir said, which is something that he does in his own life but is not part of the official study. "You can check your e-mail, but make sure you have periods of focus. Cut to your calendar later."

Contact Lisa Fernandez at 408-920-5002.

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.




Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™