Single-Tasking and Productivity

Passage selected from the book *Focus: A simplicity manifesto in the Age of Distraction*

"Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work at hand. The sun's rays do not burn until brought to a focus." – Alexander Graham Bell

Many of us grew up in the age of multi-tasking, where you couldn't call yourself productive if you weren't a good multi-tasker. We learned to always have several balls in the air at once — while writing something on the computer, we had a phone call going, we were writing something on a notepad or paper form, we were reviewing documents, sometimes even holding a meeting at the same time. That's the productive worker, the effective executive. When email, instant messaging, blogs and the rest of the Internet came along, multi-tasking went haywire. Now we're expected to do 10 things on the computer at once, still with the paper, phone, and meetings going, along with texting. Multi-tasking is no longer about being productive — it's a way of living. However, it's not a sane way of living, and it's not necessarily the most effective way of working either.

The Problems with Multi-Tasking

Our brains can really only handle one thing at a time. When we get used to switching between one thing and another we program our brains to have a short attention span. This is why it's so hard to learn to focus on one thing at a time.

Multi-tasking is not the most effective way to work. It's less efficient because of the need to constantly switch gears for each new task. Multi-tasking is also more complicated and thus, more prone to errors and stress.

A single-tasking life

Imagine instead, a single-tasking life. Imagine waking and going for a run, as if running were all you do. Nothing else is on your mind but the run, and you do it to the very best of your abilities. Then you eat, enjoying every flavorful bite of your fresh breakfast. You read a novel, as if nothing else in the world existed. You do your work, one task at a time, each task done with full focus and dedication. You spend time with loved ones, as if nothing else existed.

If you live your life this way, by this single principle, it will have tremendous effects. Your work will become more focused. You'll become better at anything you do. Your time alone will be of better quality. Your time with your family will be much more meaningful. Your reading will have fewer distractions.

How to live a single-tasking life

It sounds nice, but how do you live a life like this? Is it as simple as saying you're going to do it, or is it impossible? Somewhere in between, of course, and like anything worth doing, it takes practice. Here's what we recommend:

1. **Become conscious.** When you start doing something, become more aware you're starting that activity. As you do it, become aware of really doing it, and of the urge to switch to something else. Paying attention is the important first step.

2. **Clear distractions.** If you're going to read, clear everything else away, so you have nothing but you and the book. If you're going to do email, close every other program and all browser tabs except the email tab, and just do that. If you're going to do a work task, have nothing else open, and turn off the phone.

3. **Choose wisely.** Don't just start doing something. Give it some thought — do you really want to turn on the TV? Do you really want to do email right now? Is this the most important work task you can be doing?

4. **Put everything you have into an activity.** If you're going to make tea, do it with complete focus, complete dedication. If you're going to have a conversation, really listen. If you're going to study, do it with complete attention and to the best of your abilities.

5. **Practice.** This isn't something you'll learn to do overnight. You can start right now, but you're not likely to be good at it at first. Keep at it. Practice daily, throughout the day. Do nothing else, but practice.

Single-tasking productivity

While the above tips will apply to work and school tasks, as well as life in general, here are some more tips to be more focused more on a daily basis:

1. **Pick just a few tasks each day.** While you might keep a longer master list of things to do, each day you should make a short list — just 1-3 things you really want to accomplish. Call this your Most Important Task (MIT) list. These should be extremely important tasks that will have a high-impact on your life.

2. **Don't do anything else before doing the first thing on your list of MITs.** Don't check email, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, online forums or news sites. Start your day by working on your first MIT.

3. **Clear distractions.** Shut off phones, close the browser if possible, close your IM program if you have one, even disconnect your Internet if you can stand it.

4. **One task at a time.** Keep things simple, focused and effective by single-tasking. Focus on one task until it's done, then move to the next.

5. **If you feel the urge to check email or switch to another task, stop yourself.** Breathe deeply. Re-focus yourself. Get back to the task at hand.

6. **Keep on your MITs until you're done.** Then you have time for email, paperwork, routine tasks, etc. Or if you have the time, pick another set of MITs.

7. **If other things come up, note them on a piece of paper or small notebook.** These are notes for things to do or follow-up on later, or ideas. Just take a short note, and then get back to your MIT. This way you don't get sidetracked, but you also don't forget those things you need to remember later.

Keep a very short to-do list, clear distractions, do one thing at a time, until the list is finished. That's single-tasking productivity at its essence. You'll get more done this way, and you'll sharpen your ability to focus.