How Best to Juggle Multiple Conversations at Work

Key Concept
Can an employee *multicommunicate* – simultaneously participating in a face-to-face meeting while checking emails, for example — and still be productive? The answer, research shows, depends on such factors as whether the employee initiated the second conversation, the different media being used (some are complementary, some are not), and the complexity of the conversation.

Idea Summary
Technology that is supposed to make us more productive only seems to have complicated our task. We may be in an important meeting but know that whoever just sent an email is waiting for a response... and waiting impatiently. Is it possible to carry on multiple conversations and still be fully effective?

Research shows that when multicommunicating, productivity and comprehension does take a hit *but not always*. Through a series of pilot studies and a main study — involving multicommunicating with at least one technology-mediated conversation — researchers revealed the *different factors* that can increase or decrease the damage of multicommunicating:

- **The number of overlapping conversations.** Most conversations don't start and end together. The greater the number of conversations at any one time, the less effective and efficient they will be.

- **Switching costs.** We may think that we can do two things at once, but in truth the brain is always switching from one to the other — and each switch requires extra effort in concentration, and extra reaction time. In addition, people have different roles in different conversations; the time and focus required to shift roles is another switching cost. Therefore, the faster the pace of switching between conversations, the greater the loss in productivity.

- **Differences and complexity of topics.** Two conversations about similar topics are less taxing on the brain. Also, the more
cognitive effort required to understand a topic — perhaps because there is a variety of difficult subtopics involved — the less effective the multiple conversation.

- **Media fit.** The higher the fit between the mediums (e.g. telephone, text, face-to-face meeting etc.) used in the different conversations, the better. Fit is based on: reviewability (whether or not you can see the message later), revisability (whether you have a chance to revise the message before sending it), delayability (how quickly you have to respond), and invisibility (whether you are seen or not). The highest fit between two media occurs when at least one medium has reviewability, revisability and delayability, such as email, and both media have invisibility. Thus email and texting are a high media fit. Emailing during a face-to-face meeting is a medium fit because one of the medium (the face-to-face meeting) has visibility.

- **Initiation of conversation.** The research shows that when the employee initiated the second conversation, the disruption and loss of productivity caused by the multiple conversations is lessened.

**Business Application**

The popular consensus, in the press and among the general public, is that multicommunicating is destroying productivity. By diving into this simple blanket statement and revealing the different factors that can lead to different outcomes, this research opens the door to possible solutions to help employees mitigate the negative effects of multicommunicating.

For example, organizations must train employees to limit the pace of switching, and to limit as well the complexity of the topics discussed when multicommunicating.

Employees should also be trained to use the communication channels that best fit multicommunicating. This includes channels that offer invisibility, and at least one of the two channels used in a multiple conversation must give the employees an opportunity to revise, correct or even delay an answer.

It’s clear that self-initiated multiple conversations are more controlled and effective than other-initiated multiple conversations. However, depending on the industry or function, most multiple conversations may be other-initiated (as in the service industry where employees are responding to customer contacts). Organizations should recognize the difference between employees that are required to be available, and those (for example, in a research function) where constant availability is not required. In the latter cases, the organization should ensure that constant availability is not expected; in the former cases, where employees are required to be available, every effort should be made to structure the media and communications to maximize productivity.

Finally, when training employees on technologies that allow multi-tasking, it should be emphasized that doing two things at once is not more productive if it leads to mistakes. This may seem obvious, but most people overestimate their multitasking and
people overestimate their multitasking and multicommunicating abilities.

Further Reading

Further Relevant Resources
Ann-Frances Cameron's profile at HEC Montréal
Jane Webster's profile at Queen's School of Business
Queen's School of Business Executive Education profile at IEDP