

Multitasking myths and misconceptions

Friday, 04 June 2010 10:15 Shawn M. Galloway



Have you ever thought, "Did I stop all the way at that stop sign?" Have you ever had to turn down the radio in your vehicle because you are lost? If so, you found yourself with the rest of humankind, identifying the weaknesses of performing multiple tasks at once.

Hundreds of times each day, we multitask; yet, we must realize neither task is being performed at its optimal level. This is due to common misperception about multitasking.

Doing without thinking

Unlike any other animal, humans can multitask. However, humans cannot do two tasks that require deliberate thought at the same time.

Submit
to digg



When we are performing more than one task at a time, only one is being directed by the executive system located in the frontal lobes; this is often called the conscious part of our brain. The other task(s) occurs within our subconscious or unconscious mind. One requires intentional thinking, the other happens on autopilot.

When we are performing two tasks at the same time, we are switching back and forth very quickly. When people mention "multitasking", they are really referring to task-switching. Considering this, when a driver is talking or texting while driving, which activity is requiring attentive thought, and which is happening on autopilot?

Have you ever seen another driver texting, talking, eating, applying makeup, shaving, reading or even singing out loud? Most drivers believe they are being safe while performing these multiple tasks because they have done so before, and it turned out okay. What is more dangerous than the perception, "It's not going to happen to me."? Just because you have obtained enough experience to drive without the requirement of deliberate, constant focus, does not mean it is safe to do so.

Enforcement is but one step

Throughout the world, many cities, countries and companies have progressed towards laws against distracted driving. The province of Ontario, for example, just started implementing legislation prohibiting the use of handheld devices while driving.

A client of ours recently instituted a zero tolerance driving policy, aimed at preventing driving while using a mobile device, anywhere, anytime. This policy requires employees to turn off their mobile phone prior to starting the ignition of any company-owned mobile equipment. Their motto is: Turn It Off, Before You Turn It On.

Enforcement is a critical step forward, and necessary for addressing any dangerous or unsafe driving behaviour. However, we cannot rely solely on this limited approach. Other laws and penalties for risky driving have fallen short of completely eliminating undesirable behaviour.

Convenience increases risk

With the increasing capabilities provided to us in handhelds and in-vehicle computer systems, there is new pressure to accomplish more while driving. While the technological evolution we have experienced over the past couple of decades has greatly increased the quality and convenience of life, I would argue that it has also contributed to the increase of personal risk exposure while driving.

Globally, we have created the universal cultural norm of driving while distracted, and the unfortunate perception that it is okay or accepted to do so. Likewise, it will take a culture change to help people change these habits and perceptions. One cannot force a perceptual change upon another, and enforcement is not the most effective way to establish habits.

To accomplish this, we need to continue to provide information to help people change their own thoughts on the subject. We also need to encourage parents to lead by example, because one of the most dangerous things their children can do once they reach driving age is drive while distracted.

In next month's article, Dangers of Distracted Drivers: The Science Explained, I will elucidate the science behind how we learn, and why it is physiologically impossible to ever safely task-switch while driving.