

## Multi-tasking or Multi-ignoring?

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I'm not sure if it is true, but someone told me that the statistically most dangerous group of drivers has changed. It used to be teenage boys. Putting young men into cars used to provide the best formula for creating accidents and high insurance premiums. But apparently another group has become even more frightening behind the wheel than impulsive, testosterone laden, inexperienced young male drivers. So what is the new "most dangerous driver"? Teenage girls and in particular teenage girls driving while texting on cell phones. What this confirms is something most of us have known for a long time: driving while talking or texting on a cell phone is not a good idea. But the larger question is, if we all know how dangerous this is, why do so many people do it? I would argue that it is the growing, mythical belief that some of us are supposedly "good at multi-tasking".

When it comes to processing information, whether in the context of listening to someone, driving, reading, or any other task that involves some level of thinking and awareness, WE DO NOT MULTI-TASK, WE DIVIDE OUR ATTENTION! When people try to do more than one mental activity at a time, they do not end up paying attention to several things at once. What they do is rapidly switch attention between different tasks, doing one task for a short period of time before moving on to the next task. This leads to a lot of wasted mental energy since every time they switch activities they have to re-orient their brain to the new task. What ends up happening is we pay less attention to every task and end up doing the tasks at much poorer level than if we did each task in order by itself. This applies to all people regardless of how good they may think they are at doing several things at once.

Despite popular beliefs, people are not getting better at multi-tasking. What people are getting better at is ignoring how poorly they are doing certain tasks while they focus their attention on something else. For example, the teen age girl on the cell phone may think she is driving well while texting her friend. But this is because she didn't even notice running through the red light in the last intersection! If she put down the phone and actually paid attention to her driving then she might notice just how bad a job she is doing.

I frequently see the same thing in meetings. As soon as the meeting starts everyone opens up their laptops and starts answering e-mails while supposedly "multi-tasking" to the conversation. People wrongly assume that since they are in the room they are paying attention to what is being said during the meeting. But they sit there oblivious to many verbal and non-verbal cues that they would notice if they were fully listening to the person doing the talking. They participate in the meeting with a false sense of comfort that they are hearing what is being said, when in reality they are only hearing about every fifth word.

Next time you are talking to someone and have the urge to check your e-mail, remember there is no such thing as multi-tasking, there is only choosing not to pay full attention to what you are doing.