

The logo for PIXL, featuring the word "PIXL" in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. The letter "i" is lowercase and has a white dot above it. The background is a vibrant orange with various circular patterns, including a large circle with a grid of small dots in the top right and concentric circles in the bottom left.

IGNITING LEADERS
CHANGING LIVES

TOXIC PRODUCTIVITY

TRANSCRIPT

TOXIC PRODUCTIVITY

Somewhere along the line, we got the impression that the more we worked, the more valuable we would become. This has led to people having enormous to do lists and to becoming human doings. We are on the go all the time but now, some of the research is telling us, we are living life in a state of constant distraction. Instead of reducing the number of things we need to do, we instead invented a concept where we told ourselves we could do more than one thing at the same time. This concept has led us to being more distracted and even more frazzled but is somehow lauded as a great thing. The concept that has caused the issue? Multitasking.

In 2009, Clifford Nass, a professor at Stamford University, decided to answer the question, **'why would we try and do more than one important thing at a time?'** He embarked on some research to find out how well the so-called multi-taskers managed to multi-task. Having considered himself a bad multi-tasker he was keen to see how the people he had been in awe of, could do it.

A team of researchers gave 262 students questionnaires to work out how often they multi-tasked. They then separated the groups into two groups. One of the high multitaskers and one of low multitaskers. The assumption they were starting with was that those who multi-tasked more frequently would perform better. They were wrong.

In fact, what they, and other researchers found, should have put multi-tasking out of fashion. But it didn't.

It turns out that multitaskers are **'suckers for irrelevancy'** according to Nass. In the tests, they were outperformed in every single measure. Multitasking is a lie we have told ourselves to feel more productive. As Steve Uzzell says, **"multitasking is merely the opportunity to screw up more than one thing at a time"**. **So why are we all so obsessed with it?**

The term multitasking didn't appear until the 1960s, although the idea of humans trying to do more than one thing at a time has been studied since the 1920s. The term was used to describe computers, not people. Computers flip between tasks and so in that context multi-tasking means alternating between two tasks, but the term started to mean several things done at the **same time** by a human. Somewhere along the line the concept of multitasking was sold as being possible when it isn't.

At this point, I should clarify. Some multitasking is, of course, possible – we can walk and talk, we can eat food and listen, we can drink tea and read a book. What we can't do is focus completely on 2 things at once. So, what we actually mean by multi-tasking is that our attention switches between multiple things. Although computers can manage this, there are serious dangers to humans trying to do the same. We know what the research says about talking whilst we are driving, looking at social media whilst trying to listen to someone speaking or trying to study whilst listening to the radio – it doesn't work.

With multi-tasking, we are interrupting ourselves every few minutes and studies show that really isn't a good way of working. It's actually really stressful. Constantly interrupting ourselves sabotages our own concentration. Dr David Meyer says, **"the cost in terms of extra time from having to task switch depends on how complex or how simple the tasks are. It can range from time increases of 25 per cent or less for simple tasks to well over 100% or more for very complicated tasks"**. It is a false economy. Multitasking

costs us more time, it doesn't save us any! Researchers estimate that we lose 28% of an average workday to multi-tasking ineffectiveness.

The figures are stark. In 2009, Matt Richtel from the New York Times, earned a Pulitzer Prize for his series of articles called "Driven to Distraction" on the dangers of using mobiles whilst driving. He found that distracted driving was responsible for 16% of all traffic fatalities and nearly half a million injuries annually. Even a phone conversation whilst driving takes a 40% chunk out of your ability to focus and can have the same effect as being drunk at the wheel.

We know these facts. Bans on using phones came about because of these facts and yet we still insist on multi-tasking. At work, at home, in conversations, when on the road. Why is it we just can't do one thing at a time and give it our whole focus. Why can't we just focus on one thing and give ourselves a chance?

Perhaps instead of blaming multi-tasking, we should blame something else... our addiction to toxic productivity.

Some of us are addicted to productivity. We want to be productive, feel productive and even have others think we are productive. This need, to get all the things done, leads us to believing the lie that we can do more than one thing at **the same** time. So we live our lives constantly frazzled as we ping between tasks, ironically, not doing any of them to the best of our ability because we are losing time and focus every time we switch. It can be utterly exhausting and it leads to less accurate work, more feelings of overwhelm and a feeling that we are a little bit over everything but not into anything as deeply as we perhaps should be. We could look now at what you could do about your focus, but perhaps dealing with the underlying cause may be more beneficial in the long term.

Listen to this warning from Dr Sandra Chapman, the Director of the Dallas Centre for Brain Health at the University of Texas.

"The brain can become addicted to productivity just as it can to more familiar sources of addiction such as drugs, gambling, eating or shopping. A person might crave the recognition their work gives them, or the salary increases they get. The problem is that just like all addictions, over time a person needs more and more to be satisfied and then it starts to work against you. Withdrawal symptoms include increased anxiety, depression and fear. Work is seen as a good thing; the more you work, the better. Many people don't realise the harm it causes until a divorce occurs and a family is broken apart, or the toll it takes on mental health".

Author Tamu Thomas, who writes about toxic productivity, says that we overwork and underlive and it negatively impacts our ability to function. Overwork and underlive. Just let that sink in.

Productivity can turn toxic when it is driving us and our behaviour, even though we may not be happy about it. Sometimes it is good to have a quick check of ourselves to assess if we have become addicted to toxic productivity. The signs of toxic productivity are taken from Tamu Thomas' book, ***"Women who Work Too Much"***. It isn't just women who work too much though, so listen to the questions and answer honestly.

1. Apart from sleep, are you able to rest without feeling guilty because you could be doing something **'constructive'**?
2. Are you constantly busy, with a to do list of never-ending urgent tasks?
3. Do you judge yourself by how you think others perceive you?
4. Can you become over controlling as a way of coping?
5. Has anxiety become a motivational tool?

6. Does everything you do trickle down to being more productive; for example, self-care for the sake of being more productive or monetizing your hobbies?
7. Do people tend to begin requests with, *'I know you're really busy but...'*
8. Do you find ways of doing more in less time even though you know this is impossible?
9. When you go on holiday, are you able to be present or do you spend time obsessing over work, complaining about work or doing a bit of work to make things easier when you return to work?
10. Deep down, would you love to be seen completely for who you are but simultaneously that terrifies you?

Whatever your answers to these questions, don't beat yourself up about the answer. Perhaps you have just discovered something about yourself that could help make some changes.

QUESTIONS

Toxic productivity and multitasking are personal challenges, but they are also organisational ones too. In schools, we assume people can multitask a lot of the time without always acknowledging how exhausting that can be. Part of the reason that behaviour management in schools is so important is so we can reduce the level of multitasking and to increase the level of focus for the students AND the teacher.

When you are trying to teach, eyeball young people who are distracted, record their behaviour, operate the powerpoint and ensure you are speaking in complete sentences, it is a lot! But then we take that approach and apply it to marking or planning where we do 3 mins, have a check of emails, do 4 mins, check our timetable, do 3 mins, get asked for the photocopying code by a new colleague and on it goes. Then, because we are addicted to productivity, and this may have become toxic, we then work crazy hours and struggle to stop. We have to make some changes.

- 1) In our schools, where are we rewarding, or reinforcing, cultures of toxic productivity? Are we promoting people who have fewer boundaries over people who do? Are we being understanding towards those with caring responsibilities and are we overworking those who don't, expecting more of them somehow?
- 2) In our classroom routines, how can we minimise the amount of multi-tasking and increase the amount of pure focus on one thing at a time? How much do our young people know about the research on distractions, flow and multi-tasking? Are we clear with them and their parents so we can all work better?
- 3) As leaders, how good are we at modelling a healthy relationship with productivity? Do we gladly tell people we had the weekend off from work, or that we went home earlier to have dinner with family or friends? Do you make time in your diary to focus on ONE thing without distractions, and do you tell people that? How much are we perpetuating the toxic productivity problem and how much are we tackling it?

Sometimes we try to over perform our way out of things. Sometimes this works, but there is always a cost. Work can be a joy, but we have to shape our attitude to it so that it can be.



ADDITIONAL CONTENT

How to... FOCUS

Sometimes we just feel like we don't have enough hours in the day and so we start thinking that we can make short cuts by doing several things at the same time. As I outlined in the Pearl podcast called **'Toxic Productivity'**, there is so much research now that shows that splitting our focus means it takes us longer to complete tasks and also makes us more stressed. Constant interruptions can mean that we are having to re-focus so frequently that we are exhausted by it!

So, what can we do? Some of these suggestions are obvious (many of us have been down this road before), it isn't necessarily our knowledge that is the issue, it is what we DO about what we know that trips us up. Perhaps you could go down this list and select a few that you are going to try and see what the impact is?

Practical (and some common sense) approaches to keeping your focus.

1) Re-visit your to do list approach

If everything is equally important, nothing gets done. There are several ways you can do to do lists:

- Use the Eisenhower matrix approach to categorise what needs to be done. I bought myself this pad and used it to get my brain organised. https://www.amazon.co.uk/Eisenhower-Matrix-Decision-Notepad-Do/dp/B0DF7DT2R9/ref=pd_lpo_d_scl_4/261-9214571-3203865?pd_rd_w=ayXty&content-id=amzn1.sym.bb13d3fc-af40-4fff-a822-e0e4c415da96&pf_rd_p=bb13d3fc-af40-4fff-a822-e0e4c415da96&pf_rd_r=ORV4CEZAQPTC7TS43A35&pd_rd_wg=lozx9&pd_rd_r=fa8aa735-959c-425f-b002-911d02177ee4&pd_rd_i=B0DF7DT2R9&psc=1



- Have 2 lists – to do and NOT to do!
- Each day before you leave work, write down the tasks for tomorrow so you are not carrying them around in your head with you! Some researchers refer to this as a **'shut down'** routine.

- Other people write **'to be'** lists and on that list they write things like **'present with my children/partner', 'quiet, calm and relaxed for one hour before bed'** etc. It helps focus our minds on us and our choices instead of just the things we need to do.

2) Know how you work

We are all different and it is helpful to know how you work.

- **Pressure:** Some people work best when the task is slightly too big and there are too few hours because then the deadline becomes critical and urgent. Others like to think ahead of producing things and then get the content out quickly when given a deadline. Others prefer to be reactive. The important thing is to know how you work best. For those who like to work to deadlines, set pretend ones or do your work to a timer/alarm that adds some pressure. For those of you who procrastinate and end up doom scrolling, giving yourself deadlines or telling other people you are working on something they can see, can help.
- **Time frames:** Know how long you like to focus for before getting distracted! I know that sometimes it is only a dream to have more than 15 minutes of uninterrupted time but read on to find out how we can make the most of the time we have. If you are able to have a stretch of time, work out what works for you. For me, 3 hours of focused time can be very productive, 4 hours is too long and 1 hour is usually too short. As a result, I have to plan my days carefully to get things done in the time that I have. When you are marking test papers or exams, you may find 30 minute chunks works better or that having 2 hours does – work out what suits you.
- **Clock time:** When are you best at focusing? Some people like the **'monk mode morning'** concept where you get up early and get work done before others are even up. Others like to work in school in the office when people are around and then leave work there when they are done. Others would be better working at home and leaving as soon as they can do that. You may be someone who is better working in the evening. There is no right, generic way but working out what is right for you in your context is important.
- **Distractions:** Can you be in a room with other people and not be distracted? Do you need total silence or can you zone out other peoples conversations to focus? You know what you can handle!

3) Get your diary to reflect the WHAT as well as the WHEN

When you know the **'rules'** of how you work best for your context, then you can plan blocks of time into your diary and protect it. I know I am better in the morning and so I know that any important thinking would need to be done then ideally. I am not good after about 7 at night and so I avoid (where I can) having to do too much deep thinking then. If you know that your PPA time is likely to be in an office with lots of distractions, you may have to do tasks that don't require deep, sustained thought! If you need silence, then where can you go to get that?

4) Remember flow states and deep work

The research on **'flow states'** shows that when the level of difficulty and skill are matched and we give ourselves time to concentrate, we get into a state called **'flow'**. That is when we find that time passes, we are emersed in a task and probably enjoying it because we feel good doing the task. We feel productive. Interruptions on phones and emails stop us reaching a flow state where the great work happens. How can we make flow states more likely in our own contexts?

Deep work time makes flow possible BUT this involves powering down all other distractions: phones on silent (and possibly out of site), walkie-talkies off, emails closed down and notifications off. It is so rare that we do this that it may feel alien! If we are going to give ourselves the best chance of flow and deep work then we have to be disciplined to do this.

5) Just start but not for an unlimited time!

Seth Godin, author and podcaster, talks about setting a time of 30 minutes and just writing and then stopping. Even if he is in flow in that 30 minutes, he then deliberately stops before he gets distracted. Sometimes small bursts like this with a time limit are better for us than long stretches!

6) Set up a 'compelling scoreboard' or other symbolic representation of progress.

We do this with children without a second thought – we have star charts and reward charts so they know they are winning. Those tools help them keep motivation and belief so they can feel and see they are making progress. What do we have? I had a friend once who committed to a set number of hours of work 'after hours' per week. Every time he went over by an hour, he put a marble representing one hour, in a jar and that was the time he 'owed' himself or his family. This was powerful because there was a symbolic way of showing his time. In the book, '**The Four Disciplines of Execution**' they talk about compelling scoreboards where we can track whether we are winning. It is an approach based on psychological principles that you will find in weight loss clubs, gyms, reward points in shops and restaurants. Humans like to see, and celebrate, our progress. Sometimes, if we make seeing that progress too hard, we give up! Whatever system you like the sound of, give it a go!

7) Talk it through!

If you are the kind of person who gets focus by talking something through then there is some good news! Our new Specialist and Networking platform means that you can book a range of people to talk things through with whenever you want. Whether you want an improving outcomes conversation or someone to just listen to you express your thoughts or you want to focus on a specialist area or strategy, you can do it all as often as you want it and it's all part of your membership! All you need to do is contact your RSL (if you are not one!) and ask them to book you on!

The good news is that all human beings struggle with these issues and the even better news is that we don't have to stay stuck! Some of these strategies will work for you, you just need to choose the right one and then do something with it! Let me know if anything here has resonated and, crucially, what you are going to do about it!

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Want to know more about this area?

Try these episodes of the PiXL Leadership Bookclub:

[Deep Work](#)

[The Four Disciplines of Execution](#)

[Essentialism](#)

We also have some Pearl episodes on these topics:

[Toxic Productivity](#)

[Juggling](#)

[Hard Work](#)

There are also chapters on boundaries, saying no and deep work in these books:

[Time to Think: The things that stop us and how to deal with it](#)

How to have healthy boundaries

How to say no without causing offence

[Time to Think 2: The things that stop our teams and what to do about them](#)

How to get into deep work

How to work with yes and no



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