

executive coach

by Karlin Sloan



The faster paradox: Going slower to go faster

IN ORDER TO WORK FASTER AND MORE EFFICIENTLY, we need to use our brainpower to overcome some of our human limitations. Much like the technology that surrounds us, we have hardware (our physical brain) and software (our thinking patterns and ways of doing things).

In order to optimize this fantastic machine in our heads, we need to follow some important rules:

1. Use technology as your “storage brain.”
2. Turn off your productivity switch regularly.
3. Remember the faster paradox.

Your storage brain

Your computer is an extension of your physical brain. Using it well can help you optimize your own thinking. It can hold memories your brain doesn't have room for! To-do lists, creative ideas, client information, communication histories: All of those things are stored in your “storage brain.” When you use your storage brain effectively, you can let go of the information you are not using in the moment, and free your brain for complex thinking operations.

Alan, a vice president of advertising sales at a film and television studio, is intensely proud of his ability to remember peoples' names and faces, and details about their lives. He has a trick, however: After he meets someone, he writes notes in his computer about them, and he reviews those notes before he speaks with them again. It's a great way for Alan to augment his memory, and he uses it effectively.

As we progress into the future, we will become more and more linked to technology. Ask yourself now how much technology you use to supplement your thinking every day. Do you think of things like your Blackberry or Palm, your personal computer, your cell phone? Mind-mapping software can help organize ideas visually on a page. The software lets your mind wander and think in a way that standard list-making doesn't. You can use it to lay out your work schedule, brainstorm ideas and recall information

from a seminar or speech. Another storage-brain tool is a digital camera or camera phone. Take pictures of things you want to remember, such as flip charts at a meeting.

It's important to take great care with your technology, including having a disaster plan for a power failure and backing up your information systems. We all know it's important, but would you let your real brain have a power outage?

Turning off the productivity switch

We need more time to think. If we treat our brains like they are valuable hardware, we must take the best possible care in feeding and nurturing our thinking machine. We are, of course, called to take this time in the midst of a global, 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week business cycle.

Author James Gleick, in his book *Faster: The Acceleration of Almost Everything*, coined the term “hurry sickness.” He writes, “For all the hours, minutes, even seconds being saved, we're filling our days to the point at which we have no time for such basic activities as eating and relating to our families.” This takes its toll on our ability to strategize, problem-solve and lead our organizations.

Our brains don't process information the way a computer does. When do you do your best thinking? Many people will say that their best thinking is in the shower, on the road in the car or when falling asleep. Our brains think best when they are in the theta state—when our brainwaves are relaxed and creative. Stress, multitasking and focusing on productivity can actually sabotage our best thinking.

Your technology may run on reserve power, but you need to recharge your batteries in order to cope. A young woman I met many years ago, a school administrator, once told me, “If I don't keep going, I'll get behind, and so I take work home every night, and now they're giving me more because I'm so productive. I'm scared that I'll be so overwhelmed at some point, I'll just give out!” She was

executive coach continued

soon unable to work because of a stress-related disease. Sound familiar?

What's the prescription for turning off the productivity switch, you ask? Take 10 to 15 minutes every morning for one week, and be very quiet and still. Don't be productive. Just think. You can take a walk, exercise or sit in your office, but let your mind wander for at least 10 minutes. Observe your thoughts. If anything grabs you as important, write it down afterward. After a week of this practice, notice how that thinking time impacts your work. I promise this small step will make a positive difference.

3M's policy of a half day of think time per week illustrates one way in which a successful company has implemented this strategy. With creativity as its goal, 3M has come up with breakthrough ideas and innovations in its category of adhesive products.

A 2001 study conducted by the Families and Work Institute showed that U.S. workers may be working too hard, leading to more mistakes on the job, neglected personal relationships and higher healthcare costs. Out of 1,000 respondents, 40 percent said they were overworked. Also, 29 percent of respondents said they had no time to step back and reflect on their work, leading to costly mistakes, low morale, poor judgment and stress-related health problems. Most of us are working 50 hours-plus per week. This sounds like it's because more will happen if we put more hours in, but that's not always the case. Often, productivity goes down as a result of working more.

The goal in great business thinking is not just to keep producing. The goal is to produce something valuable and useful. Are you overworking your brain? Is your brain optimized for its best thinking?

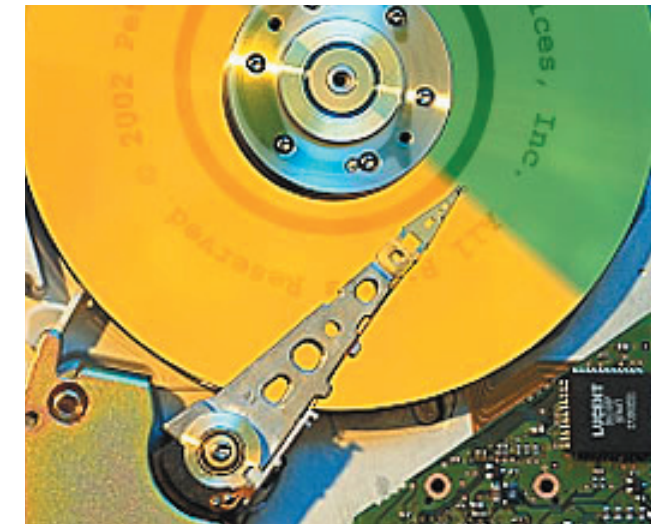
Multitasking mistakes

The latest research on multitasking shows that it reduces productivity, rather than increases it. David Meyer, Ph.D., and Jeffrey Evans, Ph.D., have determined that for all types of tasks, people lose time when they switch from one task to another.

“People in a work setting,” says Meyer, “who are banging away on word processors at the same time they have to answer phones and talk to their coworkers and bosses—they're doing switches all the time. Not being able to concentrate for, say, 10 to 15 minutes at a time is costing the company as much as 20 to 40 percent in terms of personal efficiency.”

When we become used to multitasking, we train our brains to have shorter attention spans. It takes focus for data to be stored in our long-term memories. When we multitask, we may on the surface appear to be doing many things productively—but if we don't remember any of them, what have we gained? This vicious cycle can only be interrupted by focused activity on a single issue at a

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time. Quiet your pager, it's time to have a discussion with your staff!

The faster paradox

The faster paradox is this: We must move slower to go faster. In order to optimize our brainpower, we need to remember to rest, reflect, recharge and get ourselves into the place where thoughts flow freely.

What can you delegate? What can you let your technology remember for you? What think time can you carve out on a regular basis? How can you use the faster paradox to your advantage?

Resources

Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Mind, by Nancy Kline
Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything, by James Gleick

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