we write about the things we build and the things we consume

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to multitask or not to multitask, that is the question

People generally perceive multitasking in two ways: do it to get more done in the same period of time, when in reality they may just be worse at blocking distractions, or don't do it because there's nothing to gain from it. Current research leans towards the second kind of idea, but not necessarily in such a definite and exclusive way, because there's also reason to believe multitasking can accomplish some goals.

we multitask too much for our own good, don't we?

Think of your day so far—can you spot a few multitasking moments? Or perhaps you've been multitasking all along? That happens to most of us. It can be something as simple as preparing breakfast while watching the news, or something more complex like replying to an important e-mail while on an unrelated but also important phone call. We are all aware that generally speaking multitasking does little good to our productivity, yet we insist!

what do you mean?

If your job requires attention to details, chances are multitasking is amongst your worst enemies. Juggling two or more tasks that require attention thinking enables you to accomplish all of them successfully, while spending less time on them is a deceitful perception. I'm a multitask sinner, and you probably are, too. Due to the nature of my job, I can't "pause" events while happening, and those may be simultaneous. But more often than I'd like to admit, I end up doing it because old habits die hard. When I'm able to focus on single tasks, I realise I get them done much faster than "I would normally do".

what works for us?
As a company and a team, there are things we can work on and improve in order to multitask less so that we can get more done—all the while in a nicer and smoother environment. People ask why we do Happy Hours: it's one hour of everyone's day we won't be getting on with other important things, one hour less of coding for all engineers, of focusing on giving clients' requests an answer, of writing up a proposal, etc. So... why? To say it simply: we're reducing the number of isolated occasions when we *actually* need to stop what we're doing and switch context to answer someone else's questions (or pleas for help), provide an explanation on “why” something is happening, what the next steps are, etc. Many go for the corporate back to back meetings, but we run from them as fast as we can—as those cut your productivity to near zero while making people unhappy.

Most of us could do with multitasking even less, but Happy Hour definitely illustrates what we're aiming for. We plan on creating the conditions so interruptions are fewer and more meaningful to all parties involved. When something demands my undivided attention, there are three things that work for me: minimising Skype, finding a quieter setting if necessary (it's great being able to choose either of the rooms to work in) and reminding myself that I'll be doing "just that". When we're not multitasking, we meet our goals faster, so we're likely not to notice too much disruption on the things we placed on standby meanwhile. At MetaBroadcast, music plays at all times, in all rooms—for some cats having their headphones on for a short period of time means they're "zoned out", avoiding multitasking and interruptions—but multitasking isn't always bad and music is a good example as it can energise you, for example.

To give you an example of situations when multitasking is useful to me, I'll tell you about my way to and from work when I do three distinct things: I walk, read and listen to music (but I don't singalong, as that would clash more with the previous task). If any of the two latter tasks ever get just a bit more of my brain processing power I might as well forget how to walk or walk into a street lamp. In short, this is only possible because these require different areas of the brain to be at play (for the most part) and especially because these are tasks adults know how to do very well. I do stop all of the above when on crowded streets, or crossing the road though!

Another example, this time work related could be how I check and update some of our recurring tasks at once, while adding tickets for them where needed. I could do three separate runs: check general schedule against each person's days off to see where clashes occur; go back and edit schedule accordingly; go back and add any necessary tickets. For this particular task, I find the downsides of multitasking to be diluted by not having the need to do them three times, separately.

**What do you think?**

In short, multitasking isn't always the boogeyman. You can multitask and be productive, so long as the tasks involved are highly developed and trained, usually physical, not requiring much brain processing power; if they do, they're likely to clash. Tell me, how often do you struggle with multitasking? Have you found the perfect balance yet? Tell us about it—comment bellow, drop us a line on Twitter or meet us for MetaBeerTalks later today at The Old Crown from 6pm :)