

Multitasking can be done differently, affect perceptions of work practices

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In an age in which "multitasking" is often cited as a core competency for employees, organizational communication researchers at The University of Texas at Austin have begun to better understand the nuances of how different individuals accomplish multiple tasks.

Such nuances can be important to organizations wanting to hire the right individual for a job and for employees seeking the best organizational and cultural fit. For young people entering a difficult job market, it could provide guidance needed to pursue the right career.

The study, which appears in this month's issue of [*Human Communication Research*](#), was conducted by Assistant Professor Keri Stephens and Associate Professor Dawna Ballard, both in the Department of Communication Studies, along with Assistant Professor Jaehee Cho from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The researchers established more nuanced terms —“sequential [multitasking](#)” and “simultaneous multitasking” — to more accurately reflect individuals’ and organizations’ practices.

The two-part study consisted of several focus groups composed of millennials (people born between 1980 and 1995) articulating the differences between three types of multiple-task completion preferences: simultaneous tasking, single tasking and sequential tasking. The subsequent experiment tested the effect that exposure to an organizational website depicting one of the three types of multiple-task

completion preferences had on people's opinions of [work](#) practices in those organizations.

It found that millennials perceive work environments to be faster paced, with an increased workload, when those organizations expect multiple tasks to be completed at the same time — simultaneously as opposed to allowing work tasks to be completed sequentially or one at a time. These multitasking distinctions influence people's perceptions of how much they will need to be available outside of work hours.

The research also found that female millennials had a more nuanced view than men in the same age group of how organizational multitasking cultures could influence the expectations for availability outside of work.

"Not all millennials want to work in a fast-paced organization that expects them to be available 24/7," said Stephens, who is the lead author of the study. "Many student millennials have privately confessed that they do not consider themselves simultaneous multitaskers, and they are worried when prospective employers make multitasking part of a job description."

This study provides evidence that sequential multitasking, juggling many projects in a sequence, is also considered multitasking, but it is perceived differently than the faster paced simultaneous type of multitasking. More research is needed to determine which type of multitasker is more productive over time.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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