

Multitasking is killing your productivity: How to stop hopping between tasks

Who can resist it? The temptation to drop everything you're working on in order to fulfil another task you've literally just remembered. Sure, you're in the middle of doing something else – but what about that email you totally forgot to reply to? In the moment, this new task takes priority, especially when you're worried you'll only forget again otherwise.

Temps de lecture : minute

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In theory, the modern working environment should operate more smoothly than it has in any period prior. We have a whole range of applications to assist with task management, communication is always accessible and instantaneous – and all that's not to mention the omnipresence of the internet, there to provide the answer to any query or question we might have at any time of the day or night.

Of course, there's also AI. Developing at lightning speed, the rise of AI will change so much of what we currently understand about the world of work. Right now, it might be enough to spend the day being “busy” – but as we progress further into this new age, humans must adapt to a more creative, output-based way of working in order to stay relevant and successful.

What this means, in summary, is that – now more than ever – we need to be working at the top of our game. We can no longer afford to view creativity as a fluffy add-on, instead, it must become the cornerstone of

all that we do – regardless of job role or sector.

The problem is that this does not align with our current working culture. Instead, we have adopted a busyness-first mindset where our days are measured in how stressed and harried we feel upon finishing, rather than how much we have actually gotten done.

If we end the day feeling exhausted, we assume we must have been productive. Yet the truth is that our priorities are often wrong and, like a hamster on a wheel, we can burn ourselves out without actually making any real progress. One of the biggest drivers of this is a cultural addiction to multi-tasking. In theory, multi-tasking sounds great. Who doesn't want to conquer multiple tasks at once?

In many ways, it seems like a classic case of killing two birds with one stone (or even ten birds with one stone). Unfortunately, the spanner in the works is that a *large amount of research* has proven time and again that multi-tasking is actually – from a practical perspective – impossible. Instead, evidence suggests that this way of working *impedes the quality* of what we're doing and leaves us vulnerable to errors and missed information.

Our brain works best when focussing on one thing at a time, especially when the task at hand requires thought and consideration from us. Whenever we are distracted from what we're working on, there is a hefty neurological cost. In fact, it takes *the average person 23 minutes* to refocus after being called away from what they're working on. Not ideal when most of us have emails, messages and notifications pinging up throughout the day.

So, how to actually quit multitasking and keep your attention on what's in front of you? The simple answer is that you need to sharpen your focus, but the more confusing aspect of this is that – in order to do that – you

need to allow more time for being *unfocussed*. Sure, it sounds bizarre on first encounter, but this is actually a genuine, neuro-science backed technique for boosting your cognitive faculties.

To be more specific, the type of unfocussed thinking you need to make more time for is daydreaming. That means taking time-boxed breaks to allow your mind to wander. When we do this, we give our focussed mind some much needed respite from the always-on culture that so many of us are caught up in currently. What's more, daydreaming has been linked to a whole host of neurological benefits from enhanced creativity to problem solving.

The first thing many people will say when presented with this technique is "I don't have time for daydreaming!" or "I daydream all the time, so why am I not more creative?" So, let's address these concerns point by point.

Firstly, it's understandable that being told you should spend more time daydreaming when you're already stressed to your eyeballs sounds rather annoying. But breathe for a moment. Daydreaming breaks can be short and are naturally adaptable to your routine. They also present an opportunity for you to prioritise the work that really matters.

This is the doubled up positive effect of daydreaming, it allows you to sharpen your focussed mind - and also pushes you to get better at prioritising the work that really, truly matters. To focus on output, rather than stressful task-hopping, you should look at chunking your day into sections.

For example, setting aside an hour each day to tackle emails rather than dealing with them as and when they arrive. You can also look to work with your natural energy flow - if you notice you are at your most productive first thing in the morning then deal with your trickiest tasks then, so you can leave the more mundane work for when you hit a natural slump in the

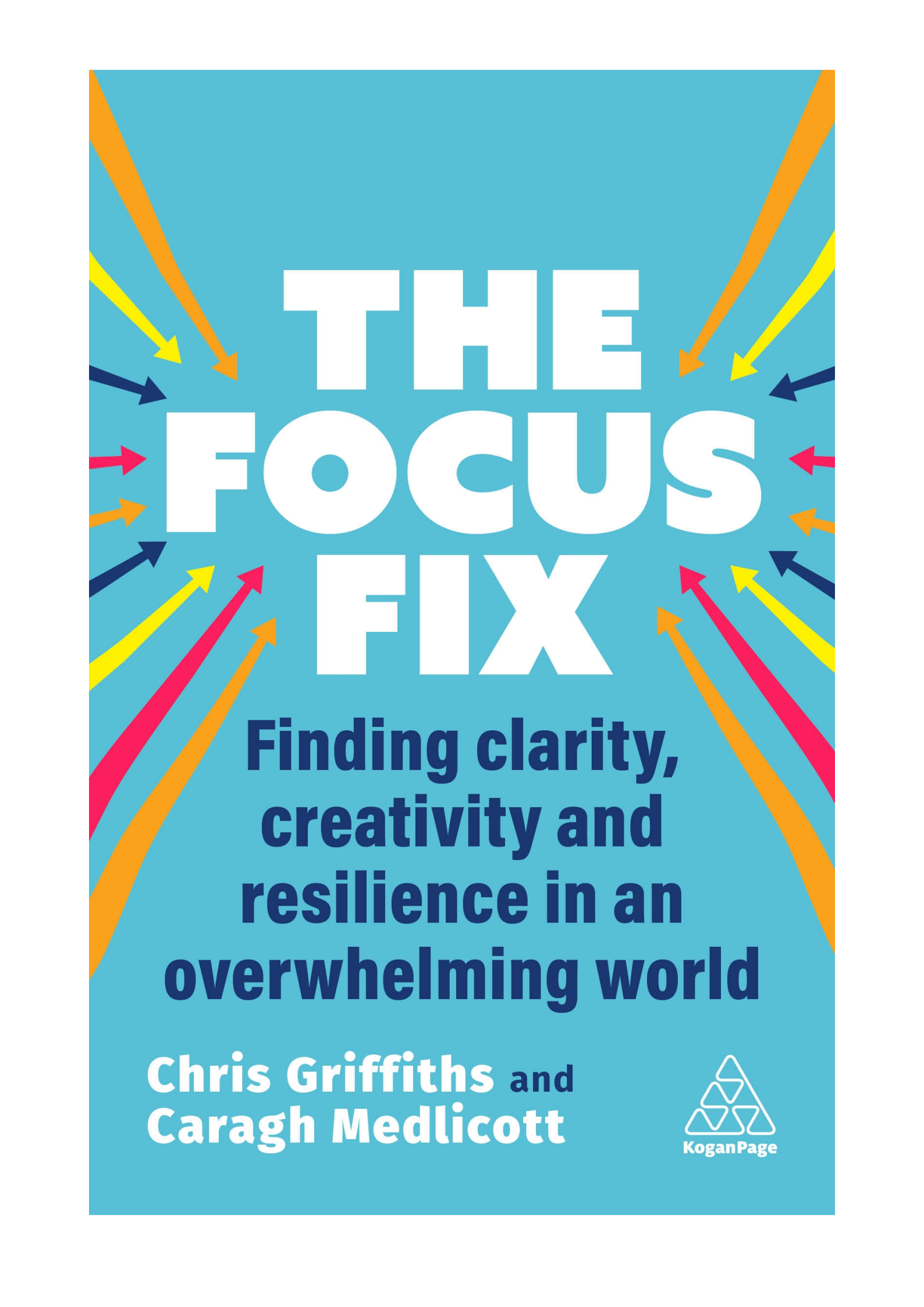
afternoon.

As to the second point, many people will claim they're already daydreaming on a daily basis but not experiencing the associated benefits. Yet, in reality, what they're actually doing is worrying or dwelling. It's important to note the kind of daydreaming which elicits cognitive benefits is free-moving and positive.

Ideally, you should preface all daydream sessions with time spent getting to know the subject you'd like to be more creative and productive in. For example, a marketer might spend some time on competitor research before coming up with their own campaign ideas - this is because it gives your subconscious mind something to chew on while you are in the daydreaming state so that the ideas you go on to produce are concentrated in an area that is helpful to you.

Ultimately, it may sound like a paradox, but spending more time mind wandering will actually allow you to hone your attention and get more done. With more focus, mental clarity and creative ideas to boot, daydreaming is the unlikely secret weapon for beating your multitasking addiction and achieving real success at work.

Chris Griffiths and Caragh Medlicott are the authors of *The Focus Fix: Finding clarity, creativity and resilience in an overwhelming world.*



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