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A look at multitasking -- how it affects our performance and ability to remember details.

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MLA

Multitaskers: Stop and Listen for a Moment

BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:
You've certainly seen them. Perhaps you're married to one. Perhaps you are one. The people for whom just making a phone call isn't enough. They also have to be checking their e-mail, balancing their checkbook and cooking a meal. And to a person, these so-called multitaskers among us insist it's all getting done correctly. But is that really the case? Stop whatever you're doing, please, for the next minute and 52 seconds and join us for this report from NBC's Bob Faw.

Ms. NIKKI HYATT: Wait, hold on one more second.

BOB FAW reporting:
For Nikki Hyatt, there's never enough time to monitor the computer, send e-mails, field queries, schedule appointments, virtually simultaneously. Call it multitasking.

Ms. HYATT: I'm sure there's a limit, but you kind of just try to juggle them all if you can.

FAW: Juggling them all, in the modeling department of this design company, has turned manager Rich Cicarelli into a workplace whirling dervish.

Mr. RICH CICARELLI: I'm always thinking about two or three things at a time.

FAW: Aren't we all? Fifty-four percent of employees in one survey confess, while on the phone, they read e-mail. Eleven percent say they write to-do lists while in meetings.

Mr. TOM BURCHARD (Design Continuum, Inc.): I mean, I often describe myself as the guy on the stage, spinning the plates, you know, and it feels like that some days.

FAW: Ah, yes, but there are limits. Researchers have found that when it comes to multitasking, the human brain can only do so much. Like Rich Cicarelli fixing his breakfast, reading his e-mails.

Mr. CICARELLI: And, all of a sudden, I see smoke billowing out of the toaster, and it was--it was because I had too many things going on.

FAW: Excuse me, who is this I just called? N Labs which detect just how much the brain can process, they're finding when you multitask, your mouth may be moving, but often your brain is somewhere else. And...

Professor HAL PASHLER (UC San Diego Psychology Department): One thing that definitely happens
when you start overlapping tasks is, even if your performance doesn't suffer, your memory suffers. You talk on the cell phone and drive to work, you don't crash the car, but you may forget where you parked the car.

FAW: So we complain. Forty-five percent in one survey feel they're expected to do too much at once. And we rationalize.

Ms. HYATT: Good morning.

Mr. CICARELLI: It's challenging to try and juggle all these things and actually get them all done, and that's a--and when you--when you finally do get them all done, it's a great feeling.

FAW: Even days when the toast goes up in smoke. Bob Faw, NBC News, Newton, Massachusetts.