We can’t multitask? That’s heresy in the valley

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So I'm driving down 101 the other day, trying to remember who my first appointment of the day is with while flipping radio stations, when I come upon former Google guy Douglas Merrill on NPR.

He's got this new book out that says — get this — we can't multitask.

And I would have called him right then, after I finished my doughnut, if only I had his phone number in my cell.

Can't multitask. Crazy, right?

Silicon Valley is the mecca of multitasking. We live for it and make a living by it. What's a cell phone loaded with apps but a multitasking enabler? And what about that iPad, or the iPod? Heck, the whole Web is one big multitasking playground.

And what, if not multitasking, is the purpose of Google, the place where Merrill served as chief information officer? Chief information officer at the world's chief information provider and he says we can't multitask?

This is a place where we drive while texting and pay half-attention to each other at dinners out as we answer our cell phones and check our BlackBerrys for that e-mail from what's-her-name that just can't wait. And Merrill says we can't multitask?

So I do connect with him by phone, once I'm in the office, checking my e-mail and skimming through The New York Times. And I tell him, I don't buy it. Of course we can multitask. We do it all the time. We've been doing it ever since we learned to walk and chew gum at the same time.

"It's like Lake Wobegon," Merrill says of the competitive zeal with which we multitask. "We all think we're better than we are. We're all better than average. The problem is we just can't do it."

Who is this guy, anyway? I Google the former Googler's bio and read on the screen what he's telling me on the phone. He has a doctorate in cognitive science. Is dyslexic. Has been interested in how the brain works for years. Worked at Google from 2003 to 2008. Then EMI, where he was in charge of its digital music business. Now he's the co-author, with San Francisco freelance writer James A. Martin, of "Getting Organized in the Google Era." And he's launching a stealth-mode startup. (It involves a form of microlending and the Internet.)

I tell Merrill that his life itself looks like one big bit of multitasking. Three companies in two years. In fact, two years ago at this time, I remind him, he was still at Google.

"I resigned April 1, 2008," he says, "which in case you're going to quit, don't quit on April Fools' Day. It took us two press releases to convince people: It's real. It's not a joke."

Now I've got Merrill's undivided attention, not that I didn't have it from the start. My take is that it's not really a question of whether or not we can do two or three things at once. Literally speaking, we can do them. The point, Merrill says, is whether we can do two or three things at once and do them well. It's our brains' fault, he tells me. It's all about our short-term memory constraint, he says.

And before I can even Google the term, he's explaining that our short-term memory vault can hold only a few things at a time. When we switch tasks, it must upload what we're focused on to long-term memory to make room for the new task. And when we switch back to the first task, the process is reversed.

"So usually what happens," he says, "when you're shoving something from short-term to long-term memory, you drop something or you transpose it or you make some kind of mental errors."

I'm not convinced. I call Carl Guardino, CEO of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group and a gold-medal multitasker. Surely, he's not down with Merrill's theory.

"I almost get nervous if I'm not multitasking," Guardino says, excusing himself momentarily to program his GPS. But, he says, that doesn't mean Merrill isn't right.

"For the most part, I think we multitask too much," Guardino explains. "I think it adds to the valley's stress and subtracts in some ways from our effectiveness."

And, yes, even Merrill fights his own battle against multitasking by turning off his e-mail when he's on the phone or turning off his phone when he's writing. And it works for him, this taking things one at a time. Taking the one thing or person in front of him at a time, to study, consider, ponder or listen to without the buzz of four or five other distractions interfering.

It sounds a little wimpy to me. But also a little nice, a little sane. Maybe it's worth giving it a try sometime — like the next time my broadband goes down.

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