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engage, v. 1. to occupy the attention or efforts of (a person or persons): He engaged her in conversation. 3. to attract and hold fast: The novel engaged her attention and interest. Comes from gage, 4. archaic. to pledge, stake or wager. Gage has the same root as wage and suggests a commitment.
engagement, n. 1. the act of engaging or the state of being engaged.

Task engagement is one goal of ProChain Project Management (PPM). There are work rules and strategies that raise the probability that people will be engaged, but the approach to task engagement is different depending on the type of work done.

A Nation of Generalists

The job of any one individual requires a variety of task types. For instance, the assembly line worker thought to do repetitive, independent work finds himself in collaborative problem solving meetings. The manager who thinks herself a creative people person finds that a great amount of her job involves repetitive, independently done tasks (preparing budget requests to submit to her senior management, for instance). Such variety has the potential to enrich jobs and to confuse them, making it difficult for their individual or her co-workers to understand and respect the conditions necessary to properly approach a task. The best conditions for an open discussion about requirements are not the best for someone focused on coding. To clearly distinguish what conditions best promote engagement for different tasks, it is valuable to think of work as divided into four quadrants.

The Four Quadrants of Work

In these four quadrants, there are two spectrums. Along one axis tasks are done alone or with others. Independent tasks tend to be product-oriented and are best done without the distraction of other people. Interdependent tasks are those that depend on the involvement of other people, whether customer or coworker. Along another axis tasks tend to be repetitive or creative. The creative tasks are novel: their durations are less easily estimated and they involve more problem solving and inspiration. The intersection of these two dimensions results in the four quadrants in figure 1, below.

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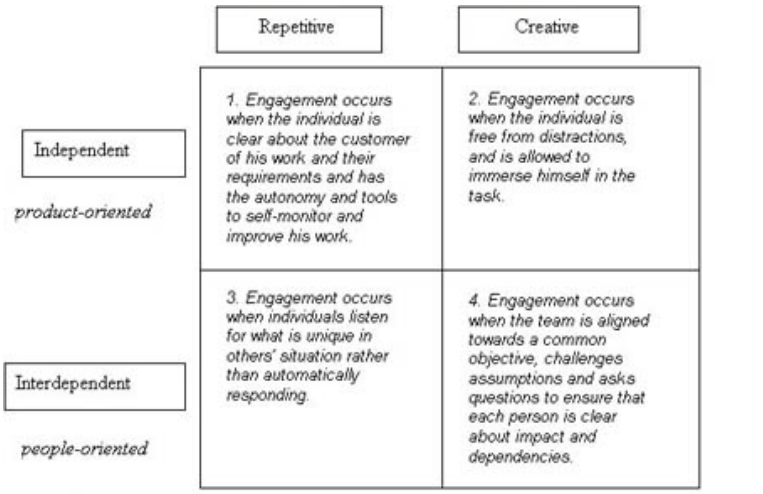

Figure 1: The "Four Quadrants of Work" defines different types of tasks that require varying levels of interaction with or isolation from people and varying levels of repetition or innovation in a task.

What follows is a generalization about the types of tasks that characterize a particular quadrant. However, probably very few tasks are inherently repetitive or solo or even creative. Writing a novel can be repetitive or creative, remodeling a kitchen can be done independently or in collaboration with others and management policy can be generated by an individual working creatively or by a committee approaching the policy as if it is simply a mind-numbing repeat of a string of previous such tasks. The quadrants can be helpful as a tool to both think about how best to approach a task in a particular instance and then how best to create the conditions that raise the likelihood that it be done well and done quickly.

Quadrant one involves repetitive tasks that are best done alone. Repetitive tasks need not be mindless or even simple. They are just tasks that have already been defined in terms of process and outcome. As with all of the quadrants, this encompasses a range of tasks. Working on an assembly line, installing kitchen tile, writing a formulaic novel or standard monthly report might be examples of quadrant one tasks.

Quadrant two includes creative tasks that are best done alone. The tasks represented by this quadrant make up the most visible part of the classic Ivory-tower jobs that might involve an individual mulling over design problems or possibilities for new fuel sources. Painting or poetry or writing a business plan might be examples of quadrant two tasks.

Quadrant three includes repetitive tasks that involve others. The involvement of others may refer to coworkers without whose contributions you would not be able to do the task (a barn raising, for instance) or refer to customers, your response to whom is the task. A doctor diagnosing and prescribing to patients, an employee at a fast food counter, or a technical support person offering counsel over the phone are all people involved in quadrant three tasks.

Quadrant four refers to tasks that are perhaps the most elusive - the creatively interdependent tasks that can be akin to herding cats. A management change initiative - work to create a new production process or implement a continuous improvement program - is creatively interdependent as are such tasks as the process of challenging and changing task dependencies in a project schedule or even planning a company picnic.

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With this distinction between various kinds of tasks, it is worth revisiting the claim that modern work involves the work of generalists. First of all, as already pointed out, very few of the tasks that characterize a particular quadrant have to stay in that quadrant. What is a creative act by an entrepreneur can be made into a repetitive task for a staff of sixteen-year-olds. (The entrepreneur comes up with a novel way to make bagels and then trains hundreds of teenagers around the country to do it the same way.) The repetitive task (quadrant 1) that defines an assembly line workers' job in one year can be transformed via a quality circle (quadrant 4) into a continuously changing and improving task (quadrant 2) that involves feedback, analysis and problem solving. One use of the quadrants is to decide how best to approach a task, given the confluence of individual ability and interests and organizational needs.

Also, the quadrants can be used to define how best to create the environment for a task. A creative interdependent task (quadrant 4) might benefit from a room with bold colors, stimulating quotes and fun gadgets lying around whereas a repetitive interdependent task (quadrant 3) might actually take longer with such distractions. The free communication and easy access key to interdependent tasks along the bottom row of the quadrant is a distraction to those doing independent tasks along the top row. Making clear distinctions about the quadrant most appropriate for a task suggests different work rules or strategies to best do the task.

Additionally, people can understand what types of tasks are best for them and choose or customize jobs accordingly. Although such traits can probably be changed, the wise manager will simply accept, for example, an individual's propensity to be engaged in or repelled by independent tasks and assign tasks accordingly, rather than try to change that individual.

One final benefit of the quadrant has to do with the nature of modern work. Not only is it true that particular tasks can be moved from one quadrant to another but it is certainly true that the modern worker finds himself doing tasks from each of these quadrants during his workweek. To approach them all with the same work rules and strategies is going to be inherently frustrating. It is rather like using a saw to both cut wood and hammer nails - eventually the tool will do neither. The modern manager in particular finds that his job takes him on tour through these four quadrants, as he in turn is responsible for completing a wide variety of tasks. Knowing the appropriate quadrant for a task suggests optimal strategies to best work it.

Creating Task Engagement in the Four Quadrants

Chicago is in the same place regardless of where you live, but the right approach to get there is different if you live in LA or Atlanta. Task engagement is the goal but the approach to it depends on the quadrant in which you begin.

People experiencing task engagement are less stressed but operate at higher levels of energy. They lose track of time but more readily track relevant details. The goal, or purpose of their task is clear and they understand whether they are gaining or losing ground against that goal. Even though experiencing task engagement is neither easy nor

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assured, it is certainly a goal worth pursuing. In this section we'll examine the approach to and experience of task engagement in the various quadrants.

Quadrant One: Repetitive, Independent Tasks

Key to achieving task engagement in quadrant one is autonomy and continuous improvement. In a sense, task engagement in quadrant one will probably involve some degree of movement towards the right - making the task more creative. But this shouldn't be forced on any individual. Ultimately, only the individual can know whether she is experiencing task engagement. People not only have a variety of aptitudes but a variety of skill levels as well. I remember stopping at a Dairy Queen once and asking how they made a particular ice cream treat. The fellow at the counter just lit up with the chance to explain the ingredients. He didn't seem like a candidate for pushing the envelope on next-generation processor chips, but for his job he didn't need to be. His obvious delight in a task that might have been boring or frustrating to someone else suggested he was a good fit for that job. And that is key. Whether someone is over or under challenged is something only they can monitor.

Additionally, people lose interest in a task when they are not responsible for it - as can so often be the case with classically defined repetitive independent, or quadrant one, tasks. People responsible for an outcome and free to vary the process will typically create a task that matches their level of ability and is more likely to engage them.

People who are programmed to do a particular task in a particular way - a common characteristic of quadrant one tasks - can feel divorced from the results. "Well, they told me to do it this way. I don't know why it isn't working." Making clear the goal of the task and offering a process for it as a baseline for comparison or as a simple suggestion rather than a requirement for how to do the work is one way to promote the sense of task ownership that facilitates task engagement.

Also, it is worth noting that most people cannot sustain 40 hours a week of full engagement, or total focus. For some people simply attaining it for a couple of hours a day would be a huge improvement over their normal workday. Given this reality, quadrant one can be a kind of break for people unable to produce new, creative solutions all day. Slightly less demanding tasks, as may be found in quadrant one, sprinkled through the course of the day can be a useful way to sustain the creation of value without ending the day completely exhausted. The research scientist might spend time in quadrant one reading through the latest memo on the company's new retirement plan or writing an employee review for a peer.

Quadrant Two: Independent, Creative Tasks

When he is done reading or writing memos and is ready to again tackle the main problem on which he's focused, the research scientist needs a few things in order to experience engagement. He needs clear feedback on what he is doing. Typically, on solo tasks, this feedback comes as a result of assimilating the standards of his domain. This is perhaps one reason that studies of creative people (along the lines of Bach or Freud) indicate that they spend about 10 years gaining mastery in their domain before making significant contributions to it. The person working alone is nonetheless able to judge his own work as he progresses.

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It is also key that the person engaged in quadrant two does not suffer from the distractions so common to most work environments - the ringing phone or conversation in the next cubicle or even the frequent interruptions directed at him by people who walk right up to his desk.

Another element quite important to attaining task engagement in quadrant two is the balance between challenge and skill. As previously alluded to, when a challenge is significantly greater than our ability to meet it we enter into a psychological space that includes stress and anxiety - conditions of mind that work against engagement. When a challenge is significantly less than our ability to meet it, we enter into a psychological space that includes boredom.

Quadrant Three: Interdependent, Repetitive Tasks

Most every job has elements of this quadrant, from the "could you get me your time card?" request that prompts the well-defined task of logging hours to more involved tasks like "looks as though we'll have to go into the heart through an incision into the femoral artery."

There are a couple of common errors made in this quadrant. One is that people used to doing the same task repeatedly tend to slip easily into autopilot. People who drive out of their neighborhood in the same pattern all the time to commute may find themselves on autopilot when they've left home on Saturday to go to a store in the opposite direction. This is one reason that it is key for employees engaged in this quadrant to truly attend to the customer, patient or coworker who is partner in the task. Sales people who hear what the customer wants or doctors who pick up on the description of a symptom that suggests an entirely different regime than what is common for the average patient are all attentive to what is novel in the task. One key to both success and engagement in this quadrant is that the task be approached openly.

Akin to the advice for engagement in quadrant one, moving the task to the right is often helpful for the attainment of task engagement. That is, adding creativity to the task - creating a novel solution or approach for a particular customer - can do a great deal to engage the employee who finds himself "tuned out" in the midst of his work.

Quadrant Four: Interdependent, Creative Tasks

This is perhaps the most challenging of the task quadrants. A prime example of a quadrant four task is project planning. In project planning, core members of a project team have to define or clarify a project objective, make tradeoffs between desired requirements, articulate the tasks involved and the dependencies between them ("We can't finalize the design until marketing conducts 3 focus groups") and determine who (whether the who is defined as Jerry Smith or an EE with RF experience) will be doing what tasks. Although this is just one example of a quadrant four task, project planning can be used to illustrate more general issues present in this quadrant.

Key to keeping a team engaged in the collaborative task of project planning is appropriate level of detail. This is more easily said than defined, but there are some generalizations that can be made about it. What keeps the team engaged in a planning process is the dependency between tasks - not the detail within them. We have such specialization in tasks in the modern work place that it doesn't take long before descriptions of what is involved in a particular task becomes a long and involved

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conversation between two people in the midst of a disinterested group waiting for the topic to shift. Do that too many times and the "checking out" evident by people paying attention to something else becomes actual physical checking out that leaves a smaller and smaller number of people in the room. The detail appropriate for a team is the detail involved in handoffs between people and requirements for a task rather than specific steps of a task assigned to a single person.

The creativity in such a planning process partly comes from overall visibility that may change the context of a task. The more clarity that a person has about the tasks that precede and follow from his own, the more she is able to approach her task innovatively.

In order to both keep teams involved in a quadrant four task and create value, it is worth remembering the basics of organizational success: creating a vision, aligning people and systems towards that vision and leading people towards the vision. Collaborative, creative tasks involve creating clarity about the goal of the task. It involves enrolling people in the attainment of that goal. And it means, ultimately, that management changes whatever policies, behaviors, and even beliefs preclude the realization of the goal.

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