

by Ron Davison, Senior Consultant

Once exposed to the concepts of multitasking and task engagement, people generally agree that task engagement sounds far better than multitasking. So why doesn't everyone just make the switch? A host of issues, including awareness, culture, measurements, planning and organizational motivation, impede the transition. It is simply not enough to tell people to stop multitasking. A bridge has to be built from the world of multitasking to task engagement. In this article we will explore the distinctions between multitasking and task engagement and then offer a means to transition from one to the other.

What Is Multitasking?

Multitasking occurs whenever a person working on task A stops work on it before completing it, in order to work on task B. Multitasking drags out task completions (and by extension delays project completions), creates stress and lowers levels of creativity and quality in work done.

There are a variety of personal and organizational symptoms of multitasking. People continually go through their day doing one thing while feeling as though they ought to be doing something else. They are very busy but seem to have little to show for it. And even projects that seem predictable variants on past projects (product upgrades, for instance, that have been done many times) turn out to be unpredictable in length and cost.

The costs of multitasking can be huge. Stress follows from being responsible for too many things at once as least as often as it follows from simply having a task that is overwhelming. If just half of the stress in the work place results from task-related issues (as opposed to interpersonal issues) and just half of those issues result from multitasking, the cost in terms of stress is huge. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that stress costs American businesses about \$10,000 annually per employee - an overall economic impact of about \$300 billion. Further, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health estimates that 40 percent of the nation's work force is affected by stress, making it the number one reason for worker disability.

More difficult to measure but at least as pervasive as outright disability is the cost of stress on quality and creativity. Personally we know that we do not do our best work when we are distracted by other nagging responsibilities, or forced to switch our attention from one problem to the next before getting resolution. Biographies of great people invariably speak to one quality: the unwavering focus on, or interest in, a particular domain. Whether it is Edison with technology or Gandhi with social justice, great achievements do not follow from expressing a mild interest in a topic and juggling that in with dozens of other, competing tasks. It is common for achievers to report becoming engaged in a single task, even losing track of time as they do it.

I found myself on a plane beside a woman who claimed to be Bill Gate's daughter's nanny. I asked her what was most remarkable about him and after some consideration she said, "I have never seen anyone who was more focused on what he was doing than him. Whether he is playing scrabble, working on a puzzle or doing work at home, he is totally focused on what he is doing."

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Probably least appreciated of all is the cost from multitasking to project completions. If people throughout an organization are busily multitasking, tasks take longer to complete. If tasks take longer to complete, so must projects. Our experience with organizations suggests that the cost (in terms of delays in task and project completions) of multitasking is invariably many times what most people in that organization would assume.

What Is Task Engagement?

engage, v. 1. to occupy the attention or efforts of (a person or persons): He engaged her in conversation. 2. to attract and hold fast: The novel engaged her attention and interest.

engagement, n. 1. the act of engaging or the state of being engaged.

task engagement, n. 1. the opposite of multitasking. He was engaged in that one task until he had handed it off to her.

Task engagement is what we want to start doing when we stop multitasking. Think of it as the positive benefit that comes from reduced multitasking and interruptions.

We have found it useful to think of task engagement as occurring in three steps: stable priorities, protection from interruptions and the experience of flow. In practice these three steps do not have distinct boundaries, but success in attaining task engagement usually follows from treating them as sequential steps. Task engagement results in reduced levels of stress and more rapid task completion.

There are at least two dimensions to the benefit of task engagement. One has to do with the speed of task completion and the other with the quality of the work and work experience. The more one can work tasks to completion before starting the next one, the more quickly tasks will be completed. This is a significant organizational benefit.

Additionally, people able to focus on one thing at a time feel less stressed, a significant personal benefit. Juggling is quite rightfully thought of as a specialty act at the circus and professional jugglers are not expected to do it for long. Yet we regularly make such demands on people in the modern work place. Further, people able to focus on their work typically make fewer mistakes and are more innovative. Faster, better quality, more innovative and more enjoyable: such a description of work ought to appeal to management and employee alike.

The Transition from Multitasking to Task Engagement

We have seen many times that it is almost never enough to tell people not to multitask. As we will explore in the next article, so many things in the work place conspire to thwart task engagement that simply advocating a turn from multitasking is like telling an American child that he ought to speak something other than English. Without at least a description of the alternative, admonishing people to stop multitasking may actually add to the stress they experience from it.

Step one towards reducing multitasking and increasing the amount of task engagement is awareness. Simply making the distinction between the two, as done in this article, can help people to become aware of the frequency of multitasking. Until that

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occurs, most people don't even see the problem - or if they notice multitasking at all they see it as a badge of honor.

Assuming people are aware of the problem, how do we build a bridge from the current world of multitasking to task engagement? Such a bridge follows from focusing on three issues: coordinated priorities, work rules that protect individuals from random-priority interruptions and the experience of "flow" (the psychology of engagement).

Coordinated Priorities

Most of the time management techniques focus on individual goals and to-do lists. That might be effective if people actually did work in isolation. In practice, most prioritized to-do lists are disrupted after first contact with a customer, co-worker or boss. Given that we live and work in situations of massive interdependence, priorities need to be synchronized.

The best foundation for synchronized task priorities is project planning. Note that a key distinction between critical chain and traditional project management is the shift in emphasis from meeting deadlines for tasks to working tasks to completion in order of priority. Project plans make possible the relative ranking of tasks, allowing people to be confident in their priorities. Buffers help create stable priorities even as unexpected issues arise.

But work is never the sum total of project task times. Invariably there are tasks that fall outside of the neatly defined boundaries of a project. Some work results from organizational initiatives, some from simply being part of an organization. In order to coordinate priorities, work groups need to agree on how to interweave project and non-project work. We don't need detailed rules for ranking project and non-project work; we need to pick relative rankings and stick with them.

Work Rules

Work rules address a variety of issues, the chief of which is interruptions. We've found that often interruptions are so pervasive they aren't even noticed. We're about to delve into a task and the phone rings or a conversation starts in the hallway outside our cubicle or a meeting starts or someone walks up to our desk or our e-mail notifier dings. Even the most conservative estimate about how much time it takes to address each interruption suggests that the average worker loses at least 25% of his time to interruptions. One key shift to a culture of task engagement is the creation of work rules that allow people to deal with and minimize interruptions.

Signs can be used to let co-workers know whether we're absorbed in a high-priority task or "open for business" and available for questions or conversations.

Work rules for any particular group should also cover meeting and e-mail protocol. Knowledge workers use information as raw material for their work but can find that they are drowning in it. You can save others a lot of time by excluding them from emails or meetings if the information to be shared can't be acted on.

Ultimately work groups have to agree to the work rules that will guide their behavior. Working without such rules is like driving a road without agreement about which side of it traffic should travel. It's not important whether you travel on the right or

left side of the road. What's important is that other drivers agree. So it is with priorities and work rules.

Psychology of Engagement

Task engagement follows from clear and stable priorities that allow a person to stay on a task to its completion. Task engagement requires protection from continual interruptions when working high-priority or high-focus tasks. At its best, task engagement suggests an absorption in a task so complete that one loses track of anything else. Obviously not all tasks are conducive to such a state, but understanding how such engagement is reached is useful as a guide to understanding how best to manage people intent on engagement.

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, formerly head of the University of Chicago's Psychology Department and now at Claremont College's Peter F. Drucker School of Management, has spent decades researching what he calls "flow." Flow refers to the total absorption that characterizes life's most intense and enjoyable moments. Flow can follow from tasks as varied as mountain climbing, assembly work, painting, surgery or reading. In his studies, Csikszentmihalyi has identified a number of elements present in flow. His research offers a checklist for individuals interested in not only enjoying their work more but in attaining higher levels of quality and creativity.

Csikszentmihalyi has identified particular conditions that encourage the experience of flow. People in flow have clear goals, get immediate feedback, are engaged in a task or activity that represents a balance between challenge and skill (not enough challenge and one is bored, too much challenge and one is overwhelmed or stressed), and are free from distractions. The conditions that promote flow may include a merging of action and awareness (one is thinking about what one is doing and not distracted by any other thoughts), no thought of failure and not being self-conscious. The experience of flow typically results in time "flying by." Once the flow experience is past, the person is more capable (or developed, having improved their skills) and more likely to see the task as worth doing for its own sake.

When such conditions are present, task engagement is at its best. Managers who attempt to create such conditions for their people will find that much about current work practices and environments have to change.

Obstacles

There are numerous obstacles to task engagement. People can be assigned to tasks that are too challenging or not challenging enough. Management may make no provision for task variation, assuming un-buffered task times. They may not prioritize projects or the tasks within them. In most organizations, it's considered rude to send people away when you're focused on a task. And most professionals have a service side to their job that calls on them to treat all interruptions as higher priority than any task they're currently working.

Step one to addressing such obstacles to engagement is getting serious about what interruptions and multitasking cost. From employee turnover to delays in project launch, the costs of non-engagement can make more difference to profits than any traditional cost cutting measures.