



Project Management Multitasking

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Overview

The term “multitasking” has been used to describe the act of focusing on many things at once. It is almost a survival technique to cope with the flood of information coming our way. Life is becoming more complex with many more things needing our attention.

Project Management is no different. In fact the Project Manager can be considered the master of multitasking. Everyone wants a piece of your time, and there are a multitude of things to keep track of.

Evolution of Multitasking

In March 2008 Time Magazine ran a cover story entitled “The Multitasking Generation”. The comments below from that article summarise the speed with which multitasking is evolving.

“Human beings have always had a capacity to attend to several things at once. Mothers have done it since the hunter-gatherer era--picking berries while suckling an infant, stirring the pot with one eye on the toddler. Nor is electronic multitasking entirely new: we've been driving while listening to car radios since they became popular in the 1930s. But there is no doubt that the phenomenon has reached a kind of warp speed in the era of Web-enabled computers, when it has become routine to conduct six IM conversations, watch American Idol on TV and Google the names of last season's finalists all at once.”

Can we Multitask Efficiently

The Time article also covers our brain’s ability to multitask:

“Although many aspects of the networked life remain scientifically uncharted, there's substantial literature on how the brain handles multitasking. And basically, it doesn't. It may seem that a teenage girl is writing an instant message, burning a CD and telling her mother that she's doing homework--all at the same time--but what's really going on is a rapid toggling among tasks rather than simultaneous processing. "You're doing more than one thing, but you're ordering them and deciding which one to do at any one time," explains neuroscientist Grafman.”

“The switching of attention from one task to another, the toggling action, occurs in a region right behind the forehead called Brodmann's Area 10 in the brain's anterior prefrontal cortex, according to a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study by Grafman's team. Brodmann's Area 10 is part of the frontal lobes, which "are important for maintaining long-term goals and achieving them," Grafman explains. "The most anterior part allows you to

leave something when it's incomplete and return to the same place and continue from there." This gives us a "form of multitasking," he says, though it's actually sequential processing.

Because the prefrontal cortex is one of the last regions of the brain to mature and one of the first to decline with aging, young children do not multitask well, and neither do most adults over 60. New fMRI studies at Toronto's Rotman Research Institute suggest that as we get older, we have more trouble "turning down background thoughts when turning to a new task," says Rotman senior scientist and assistant director Cheryl Grady. "Younger adults are better at tuning out stuff when they want to," says Grady. "I'm in my 50s, and I know that I can't work and listen to music with lyrics; it was easier when I was younger.

But the ability to multiprocess has its limits, even among young adults. When people try to perform two or more related tasks either at the same time or alternating rapidly between them, errors go way up, and it takes far longer--often double the time or more--to get the jobs done than if they were done sequentially, says David E. Meyer, director of the Brain, Cognition and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan: "The toll in terms of slowdown is extremely large--amazingly so."

Meyer frequently tests Gen M students in his lab, and he sees no exception for them, despite their "mystique" as master multitaskers. "The bottom line is that you can't simultaneously be thinking about your tax return and reading an essay, just as you can't talk to yourself about two things at once," he says. "If a teenager is trying to have a conversation on an e-mail chat line while doing algebra, she'll suffer a decrease in efficiency, compared to if she just thought about algebra until she was done. People may think otherwise, but it's a myth. With such complicated tasks [you] will never, ever be able to overcome the inherent limitations in the brain for processing information during multitasking. It just can't be, any more than the best of all humans will ever be able to run a one-minute mile."

Multitasking in Projects

While the article in Time is fascinating about general life, how does this impact projects? Some might see Project Managers as essential at multitasking yet the research tells us this is not an efficient way to work. Better to focus on one thing and get it done rather than ten things and take twenty times as long.

It also spills over into how work is allocated. Should you give someone one or two tasks to complete, or ten tasks to complete? The research points to one or two. If you do have to give them ten, also give them a priority so they work consistently on one at a time with minimum switching between tasks.

Short Term Focus in Projects

Recently I read of a guy who walked to the South Pole dragging a 120 kg sled. He said what kept him going was not focusing on reaching the pole. He focused on "only one hour before I get a break" or "I just want to reach the base of that hill". Focus on small goals and the big goal will arrive before you know it.

The whole team should be focused on achieving short term goals which minimise multitasking. For example, rather than focus on spending three months to produce a business case, focus on putting together the costs, putting together the benefits, doing a risk analysis, doing a resource plan. Focus people on the smaller goals. Set milestones for smaller steps.

In your personal role as Project Manager, try to organise your time so that you devote blocks of time to each task. Avoid as much as possible trying to work on too many things at once. If you have eight things to do in a day try to block out half an hour for each (or however long each might take). Don't do a bit on something, drop it, do something else then pick up the first thing again.

Long Term Focus in Projects

It may seem contradictory at first but the Project Manager also needs to have a long term focus. They are the project "visionaries" and need to see what is down the road. The trick is not to get bogged down in the detail of what is down the road unless there is a very good reason to do so.

To give an example, suppose you know that in two months you will need to go through an approval process. It might be internal or external. Perhaps it is with a government regulatory agency. You have done it a thousand times before and this project should be no different. Unless you have lots of time on your hands, park that task until you are closer. Keep your focus on the work you have to do this week and next. Don't sacrifice your attention on something that can just as easily wait a few weeks if it will detract from the immediate.

On the other hand, if you have never had to seek approval, work out what are the big questions I have to answer? Get the answers and leave the details until closer to the date.

An Example using Email

I picked up this idea some months ago and it has certainly helped me with email. I had to modify the original idea a bit but here is how I deal with email. Previously, I tended to read email, park them if something needed to be done, come back to them, and generally have an overfilled inbox. Now I have a number of folders which I numbered so they sort in the order I want.

1. Do
2. Defer
3. Delegate
4. Read
5. Archive

When I go to my inbox, I sort the emails immediately into one of the five categories. In fact the "5. Archive" folder has a number of subfolders where I store emails by topic or sender.

Once the inbox is distributed to the five folders, I go to "1. Do" and do whatever needs to be done to the immediately actionable emails. I go to the "3. Delegate" box and send the emails to whoever is being assigned to cover the emails. I also check on other delegated emails to see if any are overdue.

When times permits, I look at “2. Defer” and work on my top priority emails in that box. It is surprising how many last a few weeks in this folder and then get deleted. They are no longer relevant. Finally I spend about an hour a day in the “4. Read” folder reading information that may be newsletters or emails with some technical information.

The key thing is that I am not multitasking. I devote a chunk of time to address particular actions be they doing things, reading things, delegating things or checking the backlog of deferred actions. It makes me much more efficient, and ensures the most important tasks get addressed first.

Summary

We are asked to digest more inputs every day. In ten or twenty or fifty years we will probably look back on the “good old days” in 2009 when we only had ten things to do at once. A Project Manager needs to manage their team so that they limit multitasking. This can best be done by reducing the flood of work that can be assigned to an individual. Give them clear tasks with priorities and deadlines.

References

Time Magazine March 2008. “The Multitasking Generation” *Wendy Cole/Chicago, Sonja Steptoe/Los Angeles, Sarah Sturmon Dale/Minneapolis*

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About Project Perfect

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Project Perfect sell “Project Administrator” software, which is a tool to assist organisations better manage project risks, issues, budgets, scope, documentation planning and scheduling. They also created a technique for gathering requirements called “Method H”™, and sell software to support the technique. Their most recent product is Software Package Selection Process (SP²) an online methodology for selecting and implementing software packages. For more information on Project tools or Project Management visit www.projectperfect.com.au