

Organizational multitasking: The secret killer of engineering productivity

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Nearly all of the research on multitasking to date has studied its effects on individuals. Researchers have not yet paid much attention to the effects of multitasking on organizations, but there are good reasons to believe that multitasking has similar effects at an organizational level. After all, people do not typically work independently in organizations, but rather depend on others to complete preliminary tasks before they can start their own work. If individual work is delayed due to multitasking, overall project delays are exacerbated within an organization as delays cascade through the workflow.

Just as individual multitasking takes place when a single person's time is split between too many tasks, organizational multitasking occurs when a group is focused on too many things at once, and its overall capacity is adversely affected. The end results are delays and interruptions; reduced quality and rework; peaks and valleys in workflow; and lack of proper preparation before tasks and projects.

Organizational multitasking occurs when the efforts of an organization are divided among too many open streams of work. Major forms of organizational multitasking include:

- Peanut-butter spreading: Work-streams require multiple engineers, but only one engineer is assigned to each stream;
- Unsynchronized priorities: Instead of groups working together on the same streams in tandem to take them to completion (e.g., a feature, a module or sub-system), each group is focused on different streams that do not overlap; and
- Overtaxed managers: Managers are supporting too many work-streams and projects at the same time.

Since most work emerges from collective rather than individual efforts, organizational multitasking causes far greater damage than individual multitasking.

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Multitasked workers and groups keep others waiting for their output. Managers take days to make even small decisions and instead of spending, say, a quality 15 minutes with people, they can only afford a rushed and ineffective two to three minutes. Every task seems equally urgent, and the organization wastes its resources solving the wrong problems.

While the effects are much larger in organizational multitasking than they are with individual multitasking, it is actually much easier to stop organizational multitasking. All that's required is a process for reducing work-in-process (WIP), and the establishment of clear and simple priorities.

Step 1: Reduce the number of open projects or work streams by 25 to 50 percent. Working on fewer projects or work streams to get more done is counterintuitive, but it works. Fewer projects/work streams mean fewer tasks, and therefore, less confusion and more focus. Simply reducing the number of open projects/work streams by 25 to 50 percent can double task completion rates.

Step 2: Establish a clear rule for task-level priorities. For some projects, a simple rule (e.g., project priority equals task priority) is sufficient. Whenever there is a priority conflict, people work on the highest-priority project first. For complex projects, specialized software can help organizations properly prioritize tasks.

Step 3: Don't start a project without adequate preparation. Well begun is half done. If teams have everything in place before starting a project, they encounter fewer questions and delays in execution.

By implementing these three steps, organizations can reclaim productivity that was previously wasted because of organizational multitasking. Not only will they finish projects on time, they will start finishing ahead of schedule.

Next week, I'll look at a well known company that put these steps into action.

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