

Head-Banging In the AE Industry How Multi-Tasking Reduces Cash Flow and Profits

By Hal Macomber

We've been multi-tasking for so long, it's just what we do. We don't know any other way. Many of us even think we know how to make it work! I equate multi-tasking with banging ones head against the wall.

The architecture studio was not like this, nor was the engineer's lab. Our professors had us do one project at a time. How did we end up in the current situation?

Ask any manager in a professional services firm, "How do you make money?" You will get one common answer, "Take all work as it comes and keep your staff busy on billable work." The result is multi-tasking. I'm not referring to the professional who has a few tasks to be managed across a few projects. I'm talking about frequent shifting from one task to another based on the urgencies of the moment.

If A-E represents the 5 tasks or jobs I am currently switching between, and I switch between each every so often, then my daily schedule looks like this:

ABCDEABCDEABCDEABCDE ... all finished
a finished here
b finished here
c finished here
d finished here
e finished here

Compare this where I do one job at a time.

AAAABBBBCCCCDDDEEEE
a finished here
b finished here
c finished here
d finished here
e finished here

Assuming that you can bill for services when the services are completed, you can have your money for job A 12 work days sooner by not multi-tasking. For job B

the money is available 9 days sooner. C is available 6 days sooner. D is available 3 days sooner. In this simple 20 day example you can have 30 extra days of cash by not multi-tasking.

How about profits? The example doesn't show any difference in the time for completing the tasks. Each example takes four days. However, tasks take longer when we start and stop and start again. (Whether or not we get to bill for that time isn't the point. We aren't creating more value for the client by using that time.) We don't know where we left off. Quality is impaired. Starting and stopping makes the whole network of project work unreliable delaying the release of work and the completion of the overall project.

We can't avoid multi-tasking altogether. Projects in the AEC industry drag out for all sorts of reasons. However, we can organize the work so that when we have someone start something, we know that it can be finished and billed.

Can you stop cold turkey? Not likely, nor desirable. Our staff has the choice of what specifically they will do next. Choosing to do work that is needed and is in a condition to be finished will reduce the waste, delay, and frustrations of multi-tasking. Stop the head banging!

7 Actions for Minimizing Multi-Tasking [sidebar]

1. **Promise capacity.**
Allocate work to named resources rather than *full-time equivalent heads*. People are not interchangeable cogs. Allocating specific people to projects allows for the molding of work to the talents of the actual people available.
2. **Reserve capacity.**
This allows people to complete what is in process and still be responsive to changing client and project circumstances. Keep the swing capacity at the business unit level.
3. **Make task commitments at the last responsible moment.**
A principal source of multi-tasking is getting started on something (long) before it is needed. As other priorities arise the responsible thing to do is to put aside any work that is not needed until later.
4. **Get work in a *ready condition* for starting and completing.**
Insist that work is started only when the conditions for completing are understood by the performer and all prerequisites are satisfied.
5. **Have performers negotiate promises.**
This contrasts with *taking assignments* from the project manager, from the work queue, or worse, based on what the schedule says is next. Have public conversations about what is to be done next, why, and when it is time to commit.
6. **Chunk work so that it can be completed (and billed).**
Organize the work in natural groupings that release work on the overall project. Keep the work chunks independent of other project deliverables.
7. **Design learning into the front-end of the project.**
Don't leave *lessons learned* for after the project completes. The best time for learning is as the project is getting underway. It is the time to adjust the plan and the players.

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