Interruptions From Technology

A Constant Battle to Prioritize

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The federal government is tasked with devising new ways to do routine tasks more effectively and efficiently. In view of constrained resources, management must do more with less. Theories about agile contracting and a variety of streamlining efforts surface in response to a reduction of regulations and statutes, such as those reported by the Wall Street Journal and National Geographic magazine. Rekindling older methods of acquiring technology, such as Other Transaction Authority/Agreement (OTA), is at the forefront of the procurement discussion.

The focus remains on getting better, getting it faster and getting it more efficiently. While the concept is great and technology has opened several opportunities to ease communication and the distribution of documents, the workforce

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feels the pressure and some cracks in the foundation begin to appear. Workforce members respond to the demands posed by constantly advancing technology by “multitasking.” Multitasking requires that a person perform multiple tasks at one time (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2018); it is embedded into society at all levels and includes all generations.

Multitasking could unfold as follows: An individual wakes to the sound of a smart phone or alarm. The person speaks to a home assistance device (Alexa, Google, Eco, etc.) to get the weather or news. The home assistant may even start the shower and coffeemaker. The person checks his or her social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) and responds accordingly.

Leaving for work in a vehicle, the daily commuter heads off and may talk to a smart car or phone to get traffic updates or ways around potential delays using a variety of apps (Waze, Google Maps, etc.). At the place of employment, the media overload kicks into full speed. The individual is tasked with remaining visible and active in the aforementioned social media in addition to answering personal and work phones and cell phones, personal and business e-mails, personal and business Skype accounts, and the list goes on and on.

These activities and events do not happen one after the other but instead continually interrupt and cascade on one another. The employee is consistently pushed and pulled from one task to another or into—as we call it now—multitasking. As noted in Paul Hemp’s September 2009 Harvard Business Review article, “Death by Information Overload,” this behavior was costing the U.S. economy $900 billion a year—nearly a decade ago. A person must prioritize the handling of media attention grabbers.

A young “iGeneration” has been raised around constant connectivity. As new technology is introduced, the connectivity requires constant attention to an increasing number of media outlets. This generation, born beginning in the 1980s, has been exposed to technology from childhood forward. One result of being surrounded by technology is a sense of a constant need to remain connected as well as to respond or react. The phenomenon is referred to as “information addiction.”

Many professional fields require that newly assigned employees enroll in and successfully complete certification courses. Most learning institutes have incorporated new technologies. For instance, wireless Internet has opened vast opportunities for online libraries, classrooms and access to a plethora of research tools and instant communication. Participants in events are tasked with prioritizing their learning over their need to remain connected. Facilitators and participants may find the multitasking distracting. John L. Sherry, in a 2002 article in the Communication Theory journal, observed that facilitators and educators are working with technology and experimenting with creative methods such as blended learning, gaming, and entertainment-education to gain and hold the attention of the learners.

Once it has become a workplace routine, multitasking is amped up when the employees receive their personal identification (i.e., government Common Access Card). The cards provide access to the programs and websites necessary to perform their jobs. Use of these systems, programs, and social media sites are common methods of obtaining and disseminating information. In some cases, a person’s involvement in social media is a job requirement (many organizations now have Facebook pages, blogs, or other activity in social media).

The workplace would not be complete without technology. We are surrounded by all types of supplies and services made available by ever-changing technological advances. We find ourselves encompassed by readily available information—lots and lots of it. However, we often reach the point of information overload or media saturation due to our constant bombardment from all sorts of media such as television, magazines, podcasts, and advertisements. Federal employees face information changes with every change of administration. There are changes in laws, regulations and executive orders that change how we work. These changes are captured and disseminated to the work-
force through various methods (e.g., RSS [Really Simple Syndication] feeds, e-mail, text messages, social media, and blogs), each of which adds to the saturation.

As professionals, our reaction to attention grabbers is a key element of success. Maintaining professionalism requires self-discipline. Knowing when to remove yourself prior to saturation requires situational awareness.

So what does all of this have to do with acquisition teams and business advisors? It affects how we behave and how we conduct business. From the very beginning of our careers, we face choices and consequences. The intern taking certification courses makes a concerted effort to ignore the attention grabbers of texts and instant messages in order to enhance the learning experience. An acquisition team member may choose to be engaged in the source-selection discussion rather than checking a Facebook account or personal e-mail.

How do the distractions affect our decision-making abilities? This is a twofold question, because it encompasses both prioritization decision making. Some acquisition team decisions involve a high degree of consensus on task priorities. For example, the procurement action lead time imposes a prioritization timeline on administrative pre-award tasks, a timeline that must be met before a federal contract is awarded. However, many other decisions are not prioritized in advance, and require the professional to act spontaneously to a demand.

Decision making requires prioritization. When the priority is not previously defined, individuals generally processed more information than required, resulting in a lengthier decision-making process. Shubham Goswami wrote in the March 2015 issue of the Journal of Management Research that team members often face rich information but must consider the quality and quantity of the information processed when making a decision. One of the traits of a good leader is sustainable decision making, as noted just last year in the Case Management Body of Knowledge, the online resource tool of the Commission for Case Manager Certification. This requires the leader to wade through the excess information and decipher only the needed data. When team members try to complete too many tasks at once, or alternate rapidly between tasks, the error rate increases and the successful completion rate decreases. These are referred to as switching costs (See also Thomas Buser and Noemi Peter’s December 2012 article in Experimental Economics.)

We have established that we have information overload, media saturation and technological distractions. This affects every other federal agency as well as the Department of Defense. So how do we operate more efficiently and effectively if we are routinely pushed and pulled between tasks demanding the same brain functions (i.e., writing an e-mail or writing a contract)?

Defense acquisition teams are charged with creating competition while maintaining a competent competition pool of responsible contractors. This is done very differently today than how it was done years ago. Technology has opened the Internet and provided small businesses a gateway to service offerings that would have demanded a heavy investment in resources in the past. For example, there are data collection businesses that help acquisition teams find sources. The Small Business Administration provides useful links to various agencies that can help small business owners gain federal contracts.

But all this access often can feed our media saturation or information overload. Where does the acquisition team start search? Which sites are maintained and up to date? Are any sites simply data mining to gain access to information not otherwise available through the government-wide point of entry? How much unwanted or junk e-mail will result from sharing an e-mail address? Questions like these often prevent quick decisions and online exploration for new sources in routine procurements. Quality leadership skills are key to dealing with the media saturation, information overload, and their demands throughout the workday.

Leaders know how to eliminate the unnecessary information and derive sustainable decisions in an appropriate timespan. The federal government depends on solid leaders to train, mentor and lead the way for newly assigned employees. For this reason, leaders of acquisition teams should strive to manage how they react and disseminate information to the workforce, how they react to information overload, and how they receive and process information. To do this, a good leader will require strict time management self-discipline.

Time management is an important professional trait. Stephen Covey spoke about time management in his book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (1989, 2004, Free Press). Leaders understand, as Hemp noted, that organizations must ensure that their employees are not distracted by media interruptions to the point where production time is lost. The perils of multitasking are identified, but not limited to, slower response time and reduced creativity. Multitasking can add to anxious or additive behaviors, as noted by Derek Dean and Caroline Webb in their article “Recovering From Information Overload,” in the January 2011 McKinsey Quarterly.

Managing multitasking takes skill; the media demand a majority of workers’ focus. For instance, workers check e-mails 50 to 100 times per day, which equates to an average
20 hours a week just managing e-mail—and 60 percent of professional workers claim they check e-mails during restroom breaks. Hemp noted that a stunning 85 percent of surveyed employees claimed they took their work laptops home and even on vacation—so that they never take a mental break from work-related e-mails and information.

Studies have indicated that the constant interruptions of employees’ work by media events can adversely affect their personal well-being as well as their ability to make decisions. Hemp explained how decision making can be delayed when an individual is unsure whether the intended party received written correspondence or questions via e-mail. Often the decision maker spends time (resources) wondering whether the e-mail was received and ignored or if it was inadvertently sent to spam or deleted. Hemp suggested turning on the “read” receipt to eliminate that uncertainty and reduce the delay in making decisions. Leaders must be aware, however, that some people are not distracted by media demands, but, on the contrary, are stimulated by the information. This leads the academic world to focus on information addiction.

Information addiction is yet another crisis caused by constant access to information. Hemp explained that an inability to process information as quickly as it arrives can cause an employee to feel depleted and demoralized. This need to be constantly connected and processing information affects 60 percent of the U.S. population—and that is just on e-mails alone. The lines that help define a quality work-life balance become blurred when employees take their work problems home, and their home problems to work.

Focus is a key element of time management and decision making. Leaders should use available tools to help sort the data that requires attention from other data that are merely distractions. Employees focused on their jobs’ current requirements need to use their internal leadership skills to remain homed in on the learning event and resist media distractions. The federal acquisition team member also needs to resist the pull of media in order to plan and administer contracts and assistance awards. Sometimes, the person needs to turn off the media sources and focus exclusively on the matter at hand.

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