

2012 Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Proposal

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1. Project title and descriptive summary

“Thinking and doing: Why we procrastinate on thinking tasks”

Employees are often responsible for a variety of tasks that compete for their time and attention. On any given day, an employee may need to devote effort to a series of work and non-work tasks that vary in difficulty, importance and urgency. While the growing literature on dynamic prioritization (Northcraft, Shmidt, & Ashford 2011; Schmidt & Deshon 2007; Schmidt, Dolis, & Tolli 2009) suggests that feedback, incentives, and goal progress influence how individuals allocate time across tasks, we know very little about how individuals actually sequence their work and how they behave when feedback is unavailable. In a multi-task environment, we can imagine that most employees start their day with a (physical or conceptual) to-do list. How do employees determine where to start and what to work on first? Perhaps employees do the most urgent or most taxing tasks first. Perhaps employees get the easy things out of the way first. In the proposed research agenda, we suggest the latter. Furthermore, we suggest that this is a problem that managers and employees should be aware of.

Previous work on self-regulation at work provides evidence that individuals have competing motives for working on and completing tasks. Temporal motivation theory (Steel & Konig 2006) suggests that approaching deadlines increase the perceived utility of completing an action. Therefore, tasks are prioritized based on impending deadlines. Alternatively, Northcraft et al. (2011) find that timely and specific feedback influences task prioritization. In autonomous work-environments, however, strict deadlines and formal feedback may be unavailable. In these types of environments, there is not a clear prediction regarding how an individual will prioritize and sequence tasks.

The purpose of the proposed research is to fill this gap in the literature by examining how people prioritize tasks in the absence of formal oversight. We hypothesize that individuals will still respond positively to task feedback, but without formal feedback, concrete cues such as task completion and objective outcomes may serve as feedback. Certain types of tasks, specifically executional or “doing” tasks, intrinsically have this type of feedback. For example, tasks such as sending an email or booking a flight have immediate and tangible outcomes (the email and the flight) and clear performance feedback (you either booked the right flight or you didn’t). Thinking tasks, such as brainstorming a way to improve a marketing campaign, do not have immediate tangible outcomes (a new campaign will not be instituted for many months) nor do they have clear performance feedback (it is not clear which idea is best). Therefore, we predict that “doing” tasks will be prioritized, while “thinking” tasks will be put-off in autonomous work environments.

We hypothesize that this can lead to adverse outcomes as it may lead to perpetual procrastination about “thinking” or at least to important “thinking” tasks being put-off until a close and concrete deadline arises. While managers may assume that employees are prioritizing tasks most important to the organization, employees instead may be prioritizing tasks that are simplest. This behavior may explain the problem of short-sightedness that

organizations face. While “short-termism” (Laverty 1996) is commonly explained by short-sighted performance measurement or managerial opportunism, an individual’s tendency to prioritize “doing” tasks over “thinking” tasks may play a large role as well. If employees rarely take the time to conquer large thinking tasks in multi-task environments, this may lead to poor performance over the long run.

This course of research contributes to our understanding of employee self-regulation in uncertain and ambiguous work environments. This research answers the call put out by Schmidt and DeShon, that “future research should systematically vary important characteristics that can differ between competing goals” in multi-task environments (2007: 939). Furthermore, work on “thinking” versus “doing” applies our understanding of intertemporal choice to the work environment, and tests a new category of “wants” versus “shoulds” (Milkman et al. 2008). Employees face an intrapersonal conflict: they *want* to get simple “doing” tasks completed, but know they *should* focus on more important “thinking” tasks. Therefore, without a proper intervention, an employee will push off the “thinking” tasks until later, failing to realize that “later” never comes, as more “doing” tasks are generated. It is important to understand the nature of this behavior in order to understand how to effectively structure autonomous jobs so that tasks of organizational importance are completed.

Planned Program of Studies.

We are currently conducting our first study on this area of research. In Study 1, we examine how people prioritize their own tasks using a scenario study. Wharton Behavioral Lab participants (N=231) were asked to generate a personal “to-do list” consisting of their own weekly tasks. Participants were asked to imagine that they had an entire day free to complete their tasks and to imagine sitting down to start to their “to-do lists.” Participants next sequenced their tasks in the order in which they would work on them, and then bucketed their tasks as either “thinking” tasks or “doing” tasks. In Study 1, a “thinking” tasks was defined as a task “that requires significant mental capacity to complete. The task may require creativity, idea generation, consideration of alternatives, or any other thought exercise.” A “doing” task was defined as “a task that has clear steps for execution and can be done without requiring deep thinking or mental engagement.” The results of this study are currently being analyzed.

Topic	Description	Status
Study 1: People put off thinking tasks (scenario study)	Scenario study requests that participants make a to-do list of their weekly tasks. Participants then imagine that they are sitting down to complete all of these tasks. Finally, participants are asked to order their tasks and code each as a <i>thinking</i> or <i>doing</i> task.	In progress.
Study 2: People put off thinking tasks (when tasks are assigned)	We plan to test our hypothesis with a lab study that allows us to control for task type and task characteristics (i.e. difficulty, interest) and involves real rather than hypothetical decisions. This study will assign a series of tasks to each participant and collect completion time as the dependent variable.	Plan to run in Wharton Behavioral Lab, summer 2012.
Study 3: Intervention	We plan to design and test an intervention to reverse the procrastination of <i>thinking</i> tasks.	Plan to run in Wharton Behavioral Lab, summer 2012.

2. Name of project advisor: Katherine Milkman

References

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