Increasing Focus and Productivity with "Timeboxing"
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How often have you heard someone say they were good at "multitasking?" You may have even seen this listed as a desired skill in a job posting. While multitasking may seem to allow for greater productivity and efficiency, the reality is that this approach to work - quickly shifting between tasks, emails, and phone calls - doesn't allow you to become fully engaged in *any* of these tasks. "Multitasking" can also be a euphemism for distracted working (for example, when you are finishing a report, texting the babysitter, and checking out recipes on Pinterest at the same time). The result, then, is slowed productivity and diminished quality of your work.

Though the path away from multitasking may seem difficult, there is a way out - with agile! Agile practices are built around a technique for time and project management that is useful for PMs and all types of projects called "timeboxing." Timeboxing is the practice of focusing on one project task - without distractions - for a short, pre-defined period of time.

Why Timeboxing?

Though agile methodology originally emerged as a project management approach to software development, it has since evolved to work for projects in a variety of industries. Timeboxing starts with the principle that deadlines matter, and that delivering *value* to customers by the dates specified is more important than addressing every detail of the project scope.

Timeboxing also has a significant impact on how project team members work. Short - but reasonable - deadlines help curb procrastination, as completing a project task typically takes up the amount of time that is allocated for it. Short deadlines also help keep the project team's focus on creating value, rather than the nitty-gritty details. By staying focused on the "big picture," project teams can avoid getting held up by a problem related to a non-essential feature or detail.

How Can You Adopt a Timeboxing Approach?

 A great place to start with implementing timeboxing on your project team is in meetings. By setting a tight deadline for the length of a meeting, the team is under pressure to cover issues that matter most; there is no time for rambling, side-tracked discussions. Timeboxing a meeting also helps ensure that it will start and end on time, as participants will be aware that there is limited time in which to reach decisions.

Working independently, team members can also use timeboxing to manage their own productivity. Here at Cheetah Learning, we are an almost entirely virtual company - our team members work from home across time zones. In this type of work environment, the temptation to "multi-task" can be strong; breaking up our daily work into timeboxes of focused productivity allows us to keep our projects moving along quickly.

Lastly, the timeboxing approach can be elaborated and expanded to organize a much larger, more time-consuming project. In addition to breaking down projects into timeboxes to complete project tasks - which may grow to an overwhelming number for large project - a timeboxed project can be broken down into phases called "iterations" or "sprints." In our current "sprint" at Cheetah, we meet for 15 minutes daily to brainstorm new marketing ideas and review the success of the previous day's efforts. Each day of the sprint involves multiple project tasks, and daily sprint meetings are used to both plan and review these activities. A "sprint," however, should not be confused with the entire project - our marketing sprint is just *part* of our ongoing, larger marketing project.

Timeboxing can be used to set tight deadlines for all scales and phases of a project - whether it be completing a small project task in a short amount of time, planning the project, or giving feedback. Anyone can use this technique to speed up projects in their professional and personal lives - even if this is the only agile practice you use!

To improve your focus and productivity further, consider becoming a Cheetah Certified Project Manager. In this program, students learn how to get their mind into peak performing condition to heighten focus and accomplish more in less time. After completing a personality assessment, students learn their unique strengths for learning, doing projects, and negotiating, which allows them to focus on the projects that are right for *them*. Making use of time management tools such as timeboxing, paired with the skills taught in the Cheetah Certified Project Manager program, equips you to fight off the lure of distractions and see past the false productivity of "multitasking."

About the Author:

Michelle LaBrosse, PMP, is an entrepreneurial powerhouse with a penchant for making success easy, fun, and fast. She is the founder of **Cheetah Learning**, the **author** of the **Cheetah Success Series**, and a prolific **blogger** whose mission is to bring Project Management to the masses.

Cheetah Learning is a virtual company with 100 employees, contractors, and licensees worldwide. To date, more than 50,000 people have become "Cheetahs" using Cheetah Learning's innovative Project Management and accelerated learning techniques.

Honored by the Project Management Institute (PMI®), Cheetah Learning was named Professional Development Provider of the Year at the 2008 PMI® Global Congress. A dynamic keynote speaker and industry thought leader, Michelle is recognized by PMI as one of the 25 Most Influential Women in Project Management in the world.

Michelle's articles have appeared in more than 100 publications and websites around the world. Her monthly column, the **Know How Network**, is carried by over 400 publications.

She is a graduate of the Harvard Business School's Owner/President Management (OPM) program and holds engineering degrees from Syracuse University and the University of Dayton.