Go with the Flow

by Paul Cornell

It's late and Cindy is starving. Who would have thought Epinician poetry could stir up such an appetite? The dorm cafeteria is closed and she doesn't want to go out in the cold to the hamburger joint, so she decides to have some tea and Ramen noodle soup. Problem is, she only has one hot plate. She's impatient and decides to make both at the same time. Soon she finds herself switching the two pots back and forth, trying to get both to a boil. It seems to take forever – as one pot heats up, the other cools off. She finally eats and gets back to studying, but can't help but wonder if it wouldn't have been easier to go to the vending machine.

Paul Cornell is Vice President of Product Development and Marketing at Vecta. He studied ergonomics and applied psychology at Penn State, but ended up designing furniture. Go figure. He doesn't care much for Ramen noodles, but it's a major staple for his college daughter, who bears no resemblance to Cindy.

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We often find ourselves in a similar situation at work. Trying to do too many things at once, switching tasks on and off the front burner in a vain effort to meet a variety of deadlines. But just as the water cools once off the burner, when we leave a task and come back to it we can't just pick up where we left off.

Mihaly Csikszentmihaly refered to this in his book entitled *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990). He describes flow as those times when we are completely focused on the task at hand. Sometimes that task is physical, like running a race, or mental, like writing an article. It is typified by the complete absorption of mind and body. Whether at work or leisure, Csikszentmihaly's research indicates that people find these experiences extremely fulfilling.

One of the conditions of flow is the elimination or screening out of superfluous stimuli. The brain processes incoming data both consciously and subconsciously. The conscious part is what we call "attention," and it involves the selection of incoming sensory data, memory retrieval, evaluation and decision making. Selecting, processing and deciding also occurs in the subconscious, which is fortunate since our conscious mind is small by comparison. Without the subconscious, we couldn't walk and talk at the same time, much less drive and use the cell phone.

Researchers view the conscious as having a fixed capacity that is allocated to various tasks. If the task is simple, like typing, it needs few resources. If it's complex, like performing surgery, it takes all our attention. If the task is "over-learned," like walking, it is performed at a nearly subconscious level. The optimal experience of flow is achieved when nearly all the resources are concentrated on one task.

Things in the environment are constantly vying for our attention – the telephone, a colleague, stuffy air, subtle discomforts, a bit of indigestion. Whereas the mind works to create order out of our surroundings, Csikszentmihaly says distractions create disorder. The brain tries to "hold off" these distractions, but it takes effort, which reduces the amount of available resources. Flow is achievable when the distractions are minimal and all resources are available for the task at hand.

Achieving flow is not restricted to individual activity. Although he didn't use the term, Henry Ford actually promoted the concept when he designed car manufacturing. (Oddly, in the 20's Ford Motor moved away from this philosophy and has returned only recently.) Taiichi Ohno, the genius behind lean manufacturing and the Toyota Production System, cites Ford as his inspiration.
A major tenet of lean manufacturing

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is “single piece flow” and the reduction of WIP – Work in Process. A considerable amount of time is lost when workers start and stop activity on a product. Making a batch of parts, then a batch of subassemblies, then the final product takes more time and consumes more space than making one unit at a time. Flow benefits groups, and can save time and money.

Getting into a flow “state” requires time; like the water coming to boil. Part of it comes from the time it takes to physically shift – picking up a piece of paper, grabbing materials, moving to another location. Part of it also comes from the mental shift, as more and more of our attention, our resources, get allocated to the task. Eventually it all comes together when we are at peak capacity. But it comes tumbling apart when we are interrupted. Oddly enough, it takes time to get focused but we can be distracted instantly. From an evolutionary perspective that’s important – you want to shift your attention quickly when that mountain lion or grizzly bear comes after you.

How much WIP is sitting on your desk? Tasks you’ve begun, haven’t finished, but can’t put away for fear you’d forget them. If you’re like most people, your desk – and your computer desktop – is filled with WIP. Imagine how much less desk space we’d need if we could eliminate WIP. Imagine how much less time we would waste in transitions and coming up to speed if we could get into flow and get one thing done at a time. Research indicates that the flow experience – whether work or leisure – is worth the effort. Think it over, but try to ignore the phone or the office visitor because if you don’t you’ll lose your place and have to start over.

Five Ways to Help You Flow

1. Discipline yourself to stay mentally focused. Try to avoid thinking about things that are not related to the project at hand.

2. Signal co-workers with the use of headphones, flags, notes etc. when you prefer to be left alone.

3. Send your calls to voice mail for periods of time throughout the day. Hit the “send all calls” button on your phone when you are not at your desk. This will help reduce disruptions to your co-workers.

4. Find a quiet enclave or empty office to camp out in when you need extended periods of quiet time. This also works well for a team when focused on a group project.

5. Remove as many unrelated objects from your line of sight as possible. This will aid in the reduction of mental distractions.

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