

Regulatory Multitasking: Does It Do Long-Term Damage?

Scott Hempling
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Multitaskers were just lousy at everything....I was sure they had some secret ability. But it turns out that high multitaskers are suckers for irrelevancy.

— Clifford I. Nass, Professor of Communication at Stanford University and coauthor of a study of multitaskers (quoted in *The New York Times*, WK-5 (Aug. 30, 2009)).

A lot of my patients overbrush but underclean.

— My dentist

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If you're a commission chair, a NARUC committee member, an advisor to your governor, your agency's chief administrative officer, a contact for your congressional members, and a supplicant before your state legislature, all in the same day, maybe you're excelling. But not if you're "multitasking." Multiple roles are unavoidable, but multitasking is undesirable. Simultaneous attention yields inattention.

Multitasking Fails Its Practitioners—Currently, and Possibly Long-Term

So says a National Academy of Sciences study published August 24, 2009. According to *The New York Times* summary, the study "tested 100 college students rated high or low multitaskers. Experimenters monitored the students' focus, memory, and distractibility." The researchers were startled:

Confusion: "We kept looking for multitaskers' advantages in this study. But we kept finding only disadvantages. We thought multitaskers were very much in control of information. It turns out they were just getting it all confused." Eyal Ophir, Stanford researcher (from *The New York Times* summary).

Irrelevancy filter failure: "When they're in situations where there are multiple sources of information coming from the external world or emerging out of memory, they're not able to filter out what's not relevant to their current goal," said [Anthony] Wagner, a [Stanford] associate professor of psychology. "That failure to filter means they're slowed down by that irrelevant information." [Stanford University News](#). It gets worse: "They couldn't help thinking about the task they weren't doing," adds researcher Ophir. "The high multitaskers are always drawing from all the information in front of them. They can't keep things separate in their minds" ([Aug. 24, 2009](#)).

Long-term damage? “I worry about the short-term and long-term effects of multitasking,” said Stanford researcher Nass (from *The New York Times* summary). “The researchers are still studying whether chronic media multitaskers are born with an inability to concentrate or are damaging their cognitive control by willingly taking in so much at once. But they’re convinced the minds of multitaskers are not working as well as they could” (Aug. 24, 2009).

Is Regulatory Multitasking Unavoidable? Seventy-Some Sources of Stress

With so many roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities, the regulator falls easily into the multitasking trap. Consider more than seventy sources of stress in seven categories:

Four industries: In one workday, a regulator might confront challenges in four distinct industries—electricity, gas, telecommunications, and water, along with taxicabs (Maryland), inter-island ferries (Hawaii), and granaries (North Dakota).

Six professional disciplines: A regulator deals with accounting, economics, engineering, finance, law, and management.

Nine sources of political pressure: Let’s call it, politely, “results-oriented advocacy.” These efforts emanate from consumers, environmentalists, labor, shareholders, utility management, utility competitors, multiple legislators, governors, and members of Congress. Few of these forces appreciate the processes and analyses that good regulation must follow. What they want is results: plant approvals, rate changes, more renewable energy, concrete poured, wages protected.

Twelve types of docket entry: Even the smallest states have dozens of proceedings pending. Their diversity encompasses procedure (informal inquiry, formal investigation, enforcement action, rulemaking, contested cases) and substance (rate case, merger, quality of service, interconnection dispute, certificate of need, construction prudence, consumer complaint).

Eleven sources of accountability: We call regulators “independent,” but they are not independent of democratic, legal, and institutional forces. They must answer to the public, the media, state courts, federal courts, their governor, FERC, the FCC, state statute, federal statute, state legislature, Congress. See Chapter 4 on Independence.

Nine internal activities: Inside commissions, regulators act as decisionmakers, negotiators, employers, mentors, task force leaders, budget makers, cost cutters, defenders, spokespersons.

Thirteen types of mental effort: Accomplishing any of these activities requires a regulator to read, meet, listen, think, write, review, debate, analyze, inquire, critique, invent, become curious, ask questions.

Nine types of external activity: Want to travel? You can do it weekly: conferences, seminars, congressional appearances, visits to FERC and the FCC, regulators' meetings (national and regional, ceremonial and substantive), meetings aimed at multistate problems (e.g., market design, transmission and power planning, telephone company disposition).

Solutions: Purpose, Focus, Self-Image

So a regulator daily confronts stress sources by the dozen. Having multiple responsibilities, playing multiple roles, addressing multiple accountabilities—these situations are unavoidable. (It happens in the highest art: In Puccini's *La Boheme*, the same singer plays the landlord Benoit and the lecher Alcindoro.) What is avoidable is a work habit of doing different things at the same time, switching between different roles too quickly, allocating insufficient time per task to appreciate its complexity—disabling one from immersing, absorbing, and gaining sufficient intimacy to produce insights, self-criticize those insights, and then share them with colleagues. Here are three ideas:

Emphasize public purpose over private interest: Why regulate? To align private behavior with the public interest. The focus is on performance, by regulated utilities and by consumers (see essay, "Purposefulness"). Many of the seventy-odd stresses are someone's effort to divert the regulator from her public purpose to the advocate's private purpose, which undermines the regulatory mission. By putting the public interest first, we avoid confusing reactivity with productivity; or, as my dentist says, "overbrushing and undercleaning."

Build periods of focus: As Dr. Ophir stated, "The big take-away from me is to try to build periods of focus, to create times you are really focused on one thing" (quoted in [Bio-Medicine](#)).

Disconnect multitasking from self-image: That could be a challenge. *The New York Times* article quotes writer Robert Leleux, who describes himself as "thoroughly cowed by multitaskers." He asserts, "Look at the tortoise and the hare. Even though the tortoise actually ends up winning the race, who would you rather be? A wrinkly, fat old tortoise or a lithe, quick-witted hare? I think the answer is clear."