

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest ¹

Multitasking, task-switching or monotasking ²

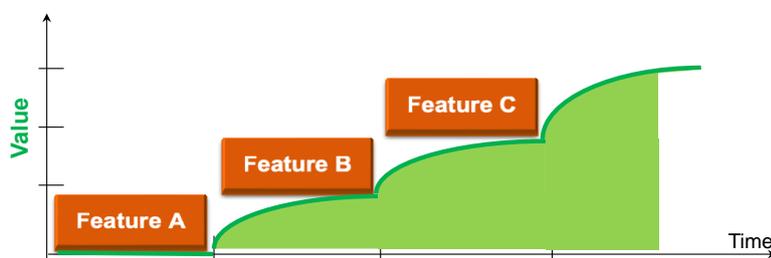
Henny Portman

Introduction

Do you multitask, taskswitch or monotask? If you talk on the phone while driving, you could say you are multitasking (you may wonder if that's wise). But working on two user stories at once as an agile team member is not feasible. As soon as you stop working on the first, unfinished user story and start working on the second user story you speak of task switching.

Monotasking

So, what is monotasking in an Agile team? Suppose a complete agile team takes a week to complete a feature. And all team members play a role in the delivery of that feature. The team is now tasked with delivering three similar features. If the team picks up and completes these three features in a row (sequentially), the team is done after three weeks. After delivery of the first feature the customer can already get value by using this feature.



Scenario 1 – Monotasking

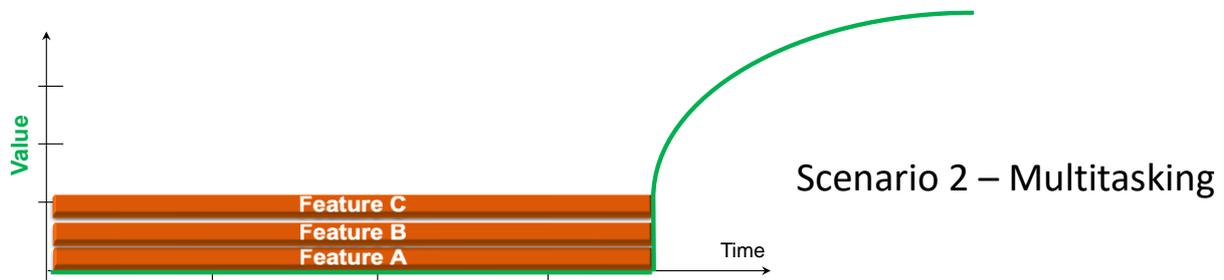
Task-switching

And task-switching? If this same agile team is instructed to work on all three features at the same time, it would seem that after three weeks the team could have completed all three features.

¹ Editor's note: This is the 10th article in a series by Henny Portman, one of the world's leading authorities on "agile". Based in The Netherlands, Henny coined the term "agile forest" in 2019 to describe the many agile frameworks that have emerged over the last 20 years. This series is intended to help readers better understand the agile concept, navigate through the 'underbrush' and more successfully apply whichever framework is selected for their projects.

² How to cite this article: Portman, H. (2022). Multitasking, task-switching or monotasking; Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue X, October

However, nothing could be further from the truth. Each time the entire team switches from one task to another, it takes time. Delivery will be closer to four weeks than to three weeks.



A problem you run into today, you can't just put it out of your mind when you start working on another task tomorrow. This will keep you busy and thus will be detrimental to your effectiveness. Moreover, to start with another task, you must go back to where you left off last time and that takes time. Therefore, you are less efficient.

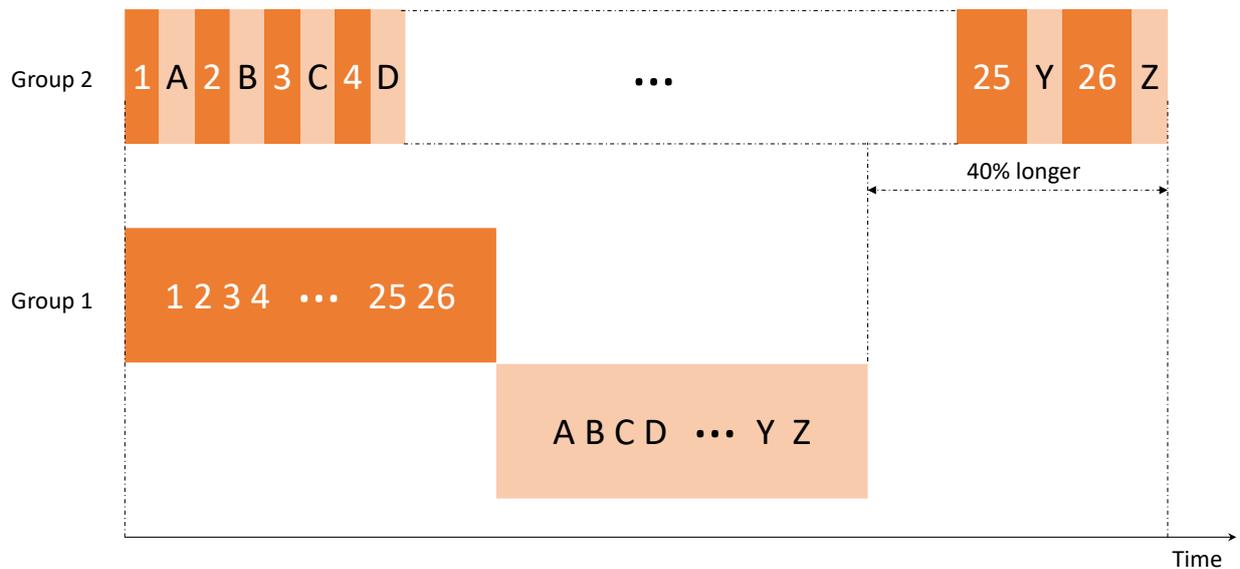
Experiment: counting from 1 to 26

There are two tasks. One task involves writing down the numbers from 1 to 26. The other task involves writing down the letters A through Z. During training sessions, I have frequently conducted the following experiment. I split the group in two.

The first group employs monotasking. This group writes on a sheet of paper the numbers 1 through 26 in sequence. When they are done with that, the same group writes, in a second column, the letters A through Z under one another. As a result, you now see written 1 A, 2 B, 3 C through 26 Z.

The second group continually switches tasks and writes 1 A, 2 B, 3 C through 26 Z in sequence.

Result? The second group takes at least 40% longer.

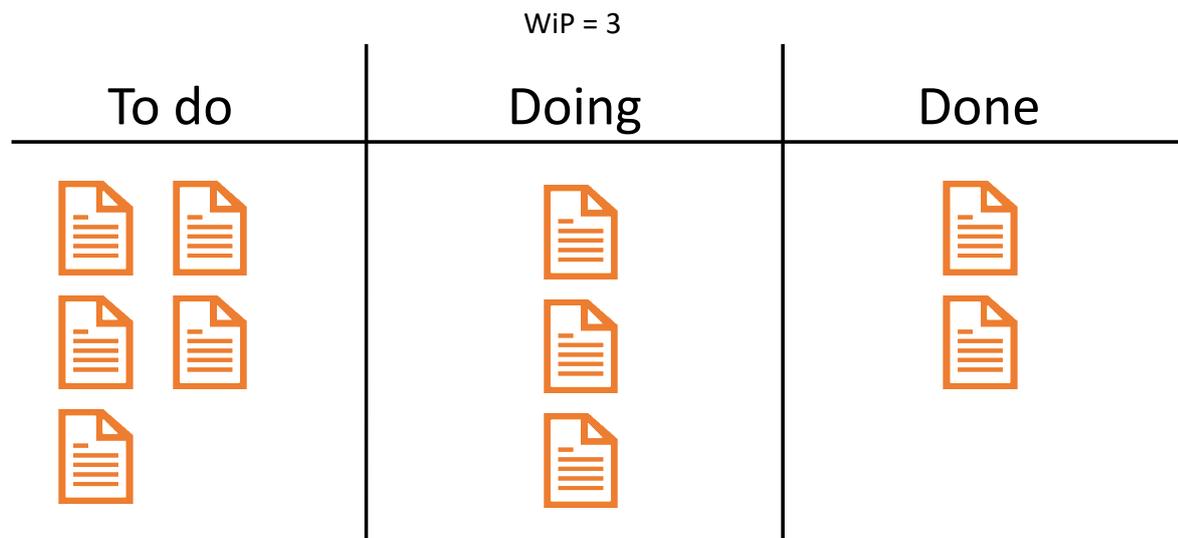


Multitasking

In practice, an agile team does not work on week-long tasks but on much smaller tasks. Also, not all team members are needed for such a smaller task. So, it is possible for three or four groups of team members to work on three or four different user stories.

WIP Limit

If teams manage to handle similar sized user stories in the backlog, they can determine from experience how many user stories they can pick up at the same time in a sprint. The condition for this is that the optimal speed of delivery of a user story is not compromised. This number is called the WIP limit, the Work In Progress limit. The WIP limit is placed on a Kanban board above the column. For example, a WIP limit of 3 for the 'doing' column means that a maximum of 3 user stories may be in progress.



Project portfolio management

The same problem of task switching is often present in project portfolios. In that situation there are many parallel running projects with many people contributing to different projects. Including fewer projects in the project portfolio will improve the turnaround time of individual projects.

Case

A newly appointed portfolio manager was asked why only a few projects had been delivered. He started to get an understanding of the current portfolio and talked to several department managers to get an overview of all in-flight projects. At the end he listed 600 projects requiring 4000 people. The whole organization had only 3500 employees, and they had a large operation to run. The only thing that was happening was firefighting. When an issue occurred, people from other projects were temporarily moved to solve the issue but, in doing so, generated a new issue in their own project.

They analysed the portfolio and cancelled all projects without a project owner, a viable business case, and that did not contribute to their strategic objectives, etc. Then the list was reduced to 100 projects, and they were able to deliver.

Conclusion

So multitasking, task-switching, or monotasking? When an agile team focuses on a single user story, the agile team goes about its work much more purposefully, quickly and efficiently. This is in contrast to an agile team that is task-switching. In those situations a lot of time is lost when switching between user stories. Focused agile teams get much more done in a shorter time frame.

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series

This article is part of a series of articles called *Sensemaking in the Agile Forest*. This series³ consists of the following parts:

- [Portman, H. \(2022\). What is Agile? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue I, January.](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). What is Scrum? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest, series article 2, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue II, February](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). Is agile always better? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue III, March](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). The ideal Product Owner, Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. IX, Issue IV, April](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). The Ideal Scrum Master, Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue V, May](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). Is an agile team always autonomous? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue VI, June](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). What do iterative and incremental mean in Agile? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue VII, July](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). The Minimum Viable Product \(MVP\) unraveled; Sensemaking in the Agile Forest, series article, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue VIII, August](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). Prioritizing in an agile team, Sensemaking in the Agile Forest, series article, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue IX, September](#)
- Multitasking task switching or monotasking
- Being predictable as an agile team (story points, velocity, t-shirt sizing, flying fingers)
- Self-managing or self-organizing agile teams
- Slicing user stories
- Agile management products (burn-down and burn-up charts)
- Agile user testing (cohorts, A/B testing)
- The Kanban board (WIP-limit, cumulative flow diagram)
- Culture makes or breaks your agile transformation
- Getting started as an agile team (a pilot)
- The evolution of agile frameworks
- ?

Please let me know if you would like to add specific agile topics to this series.

³ This series is based on a number of short blogs I made for Forsa Advies, a project management training organization in the Netherlands (<https://www.forsa-advies.nl>).

About the Author



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Henny Portman, owner of Portman PM[O] Consultancy and was partner of HWP Consulting, has 40 years of experience in the project management domain. He was the project management office (PMO) thought leader within NN Group and responsible for the introduction and application of the PMO methodologies (portfolio, program, and project management) across Europe and Asia. He trains, coaches, and directs (senior) programme, project and portfolio managers and project sponsors at all levels, and has built several professional (PM(O)) communities.

Henny Portman is/was accredited in a variety of qualifications, including P3O, PRINCE2, MSP, MoP, PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePM, AgilePgM and AgileSHIFT trainer and an SPC4 SAFe consultant and trainer. He is a P3M3 trainer and assessor and PMO Value Ring Certified Consultant (PMO Global Alliance). On behalf of IPMA, he assesses mega and large projects for the IPMA Project Excellence Award. In addition to this, he is an international speaker, author of many articles and books in the PM(O) field, and an active blogger (hennyportman.wordpress.com/).

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