

Reducing Cognitive Load

Flow does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in the context of a process.

If you look at a highly productive day -- a day of structured routine and strong output -- and then break it down into pieces, you get a series of processes, which are in turn composed of a series of steps.

There is a great deal of efficiency, or lack of efficiency, in how these steps are put together. Relative efficiency levels have huge impact on performance.

To give a generic example, consider the simple process of filing an expense report, to get reimbursed for food and travel receipts from a business trip.

There is a low efficiency way to do something simple like filing travel expenses, and a high efficiency way.

- Low efficiency way: Let receipts scatter across coat pockets and briefcase folders. Procrastinate until last minute, then respond under the gun to an email from corporate. Spend a large amount of time looking for meal and travel receipts in various places. Tape them together on a piece of paper to put through a scanner. **Total time -- 45 minutes to an hour, plus high levels of annoyance and frustration compounded by last minute push.**
- High efficiency way: Develop an automatic habit of keeping receipts in the same briefcase pocket, transferring them there at the end of every day, as an automatic ritual that requires no conscious thought, and taking immediate screenshots of online receipts. Take pictures of physical receipts with a smartphone and send to a specific email folder. Fill out expense report ahead of time, via calendar alert, putting receipt images in a PDF document with an online tool. **Total time -- 10 to 15 minutes. Hassle, stress and frustration level -- zero.**

This simple example of a common task -- filing a travel expense report -- shows how total time and energy cost can be reduced by 75 percent, with hassle and frustration levels taken from "headache" to "zero."

The type of person who files expense reports the chaotic way probably does many other things the chaotic way too. This results in significant time and energy loss.

When you multiply the cost of low efficiency across, say twenty habitual activities -- things that have to get done, requirements from the external environment -- the total cost is huge.

Worse still, the chaos factor of random mini emergencies and frustrating catch-up efforts produces psychological wear and tear. It bombards the mind with messages of anxiety and frustration and grumbling.

All of this then has a strongly negative impact on psychology and mindset, due to stress and cognitive load factors.

Think of your work and effort abilities like a truck that hauls raw materials around construction sites. On a daily basis, total fuel is limited and load capacity is limited.

Running inefficient processes is thus like overloading the truck and driving extra detour miles simultaneously. Performance breaks down, or you run out of gas and daylight more quickly than you should, or all three. "That's the story of my life," many people say. It can't be the story of your life if you want to be great at trading.

Psychology and productivity are bridged by process.

Excellent psychology can enhance productivity – creating a virtuous circle, where higher productivity then improves psychology – by giving someone the cognitive tools to be more focused and efficient in the execution of a good process.

But if the process is chaotic, clunky or bad, psychology doesn't help mitigate that. If anything the pollution of the bad process then pollutes one's psychology.

If you put a zen master in the middle of a paper-shuffling shit storm with a bunch of bad processes, and frantic people hounding him, he will get frustrated too.

You have to find small efficiencies to reduce cognitive load -- make your day more predictable, flowing, automated, hassle free -- in order to save mental and physical energy for areas of crucial focus. This is not separate from psychology but part and parcel with it.

Many people say they are not creative, for example, or that they don't have the creative gene. But more often than not, the real lack-of-creativity culprit is a lack of mental energy, because much of it (along with time) has been drained away through inefficiencies, derailments, and so on.

Being creative consumes significant amounts of mental energy. Problem solving takes mental energy. Observation and strategy and decision making take mental energy.

The higher your cognitive load as a result of inefficiency in day-to-day processes, the less energy is available to allocate towards performance.

Psychology and process thus become inseparable, which is exactly what Mushin implies. It is a way of life enabled and underscored by training, which is essentially automated process.

Better process reduces cognitive load, which increases efficiency, which replenishes mental energy reserves, which enhances productive focus, which enables high performance.