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The Stacking Work Syndrome

By [Theresa Welbourne](#)

December 5, 2005: Too many projects too little time? If the answer is yes, then prioritization may get you out of the bind, writes CIO Update guest columnist Theresa Welbourne of eePulse.

How many new projects are waiting for your attention right now? Over the last few weeks, has anyone given you more work without taking time to withdraw projects from your long, "to do" pile?

If you have multiple stacks of work, and you find yourself sitting at your desk on Monday morning unclear about how best to spend your time, then know that you are not alone.

Stacking vs. Prioritizing

The results of the most recent *Leadership Pulse* research—a study that I run approximately


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While effective and successful CRM is not easy, it is necessary. Companies that align the goals of the stakeholder groups and expertly balance and prioritize their scarce resources to perform the key CRM approach steps, can improve their likelihood of CRM success from less than 20 percent to closer to 60 percent.

Procurement performance is moving to center stage. This survey highlights several strategic imperatives that, taken collectively, are fundamentally altering the role of procurement - not only what is expected in terms of outcomes and performance, but also the type of organization and individuals that excel in this new procurement environment.

In today's highly complex and competitive business environment Information Technology (IT) plays an important role in automating processes and tasks within organizations. It provides the infrastructure to facilitate communication and share information across organizational boundaries.

Within finance organizations, cost reduction has been a constant. But many companies are recasting the role of Finance. They are attempting to transform Finance from a backward-looking, number-crunching organization to one that is future-oriented and focused on providing value through deeper analysis and insight.

With growth rapidly moving past cost-cutting as the top corporate objective, executives are actively rethinking their business strategies, searching for innovative ways to spur sustainable growth. Despite all the consternation around finding the ideal strategy, perhaps the answer lies not in the strategy itself, but rather in how it is developed.

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every two months with a sample of over 4,000 leaders around the world—indicate that overall executive energy (engagement, motivation, sense of urgency) at work dropped yet again in July.

Not only did leaders' energy scores decline since last year at this same time, but executives are saying that they are working at levels where they are not most productive. When I ask them to explain the data, they talk about the stacks.

Stacking work syndrome has been evident in the research data for the last two years, but given the more positive news on the economy over the summer, I thought leader energy would finally start trending upward.

Firms have been downsizing, rightsizing and reacting to slower than desired economic growth. It seems that in order to conserve cash, rather than hiring new employees, many organizations are "stacking" the work. That would be fine if the overall workload did not change, but there are small upward swings in business today, and any new business creates more stacks for those currently employed.

Surfing Projects

When we have stacks, we start surfing. We go from project to project, and we do a little on each one. That means we satisfy the minimal needs of each project, but we complete very little. The lack of success is a de-energizing event, and it leads to the stacks staying relatively high for longer periods of time.

Leadership energy scores are down, but confidence in leadership, the ability to execute on vision, the ability to change, and more have also decreased dramatically during this same period of time.

When you do not complete work, then confidence too goes down. Confidence and energy both predict firm performance; thus, the lower scores are

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problematic because they are leading indicators of business outcomes.

The Leadership Pulse research shows yet one more downward trend: confidence in the effectiveness of the HR department fell from 56% (reporting they were confident) to 48% since last year. This may or may not be fair, but leaders and employees often blame HR for the “stacking work” problem. How many times have you heard complaints about not training employees fast enough, not being able to find enough candidates, not being able to hire new people, etc.?

What to Do

I’ve worked with a number of firms experiencing stacking work syndrome, and they have opted to start solving the problem by engaging their leaders in dialogue about energy, burnout and engagement—not focused at the rest of the employee population but at themselves.

It’s a simple solution and sometimes simple is best. These small discussions have led to agreement in priorities, which then cascade to the rest of the employee population and help alleviate the draining effects of stacking work.

Take a look at the more [complete leadership](#) report if you need more specific data for your leadership team and use that data to talk about energy, confidence and your own firm’s stacking work syndrome.

Theresa Welbourne, is the founder, president and CEO of [eePulse](#) and an adjunct professor of Executive Education at the University of Michigan Business School. If you wish to participate her ongoing leadership study, which is available to you at no cost, please register at: www.umbs.leadership.eepulse.com.

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