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ARTICLE LEADING TEAMS

The Overcommitted Organization

**Why it's hard to share people across multiple teams—
and what to do about it**

by Mark Mortensen and Heidi K. Gardner



THE OVERCOMMITTED ORGANIZATION

WHY IT'S HARD TO SHARE PEOPLE ACROSS
MULTIPLE TEAMS—AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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ILLUSTRATION BY HYLTON WARBURTON



A

senior executive we'll call Christine is overseeing the launch of Analytix, her company's new cloud-based big-data platform, and she's expected to meet a tight go-live deadline. Until two weeks ago, her team was on track to do that, but it has since fallen seriously behind schedule. Her biggest frustration: Even though nothing has gone wrong with Analytix, her people keep getting pulled into other projects. She hasn't seen her three key engineers for days, because they've been busy fighting fires around a security breach on another team's product. Now she has to explain to the CEO that she can't deliver as promised—at a time when the company badly needs a successful launch.

Christine's story is hardly unique. Across the world, senior managers and team leaders are increasingly frustrated by conflicts arising from what we refer to as multiteaming—having their people assigned to multiple projects simultaneously. But given the significant benefits of multiteaming, it has become a way of organizational life, particularly in knowledge work. It allows groups to share individuals' time and brainpower across functional and departmental lines. It increases efficiency, too. Few organizations can afford to have their employees focus on just one project at a time and sit idle between tasks. So companies have optimized human capital somewhat as they would machines in factories, spreading expensive resources across teams that don't need 100% of those resources 100% of the time. As a result, they avoid costly downtime during projects' slow periods, and they can bring highly specialized experts in-house to dip in and out of critical projects as needed. Multiteaming also provides important pathways for knowledge transfer and the dissemination of best practices throughout organizations.

As clear and quantifiable as these advantages are, the costs are substantial and need to be managed, as Christine would attest. Organizations open themselves up to the risk of transmitting shocks across teams when shared members link the fates of otherwise independent projects. And teams discover that the constant entrance and exit of members weakens group cohesion and identity, making it harder to build trust and resolve issues. Individual employees pay a big price as well. They often experience stress, fatigue, and burnout as they struggle to manage their time and engagement across projects.

Over the past 15 years, we have studied collaboration in hundreds of teams, in settings as varied as professional services, oil and gas, high tech, and consumer goods. (See the sidebar "About the

Research.") By carefully observing people during various stages of project-driven work, we have learned a tremendous amount about multiteaming. In this article we discuss why it is so prevalent in today's economy, examine the key problems that crop up for organizational and team leaders, and provide recommendations for how to solve them.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Even though assigning employees to multiple projects at once is not new, the practice is especially widespread today. In a survey of more than 500 managers in global companies, we found that 81% of those working on teams worked on more than one concurrently. Other research places the number even higher—for example, 95% in knowledge-intensive industries.

Why is multiteaming practically ubiquitous? For several reasons.

First, organizations must draw on expertise in multiple disciplines to solve many large, complex problems. Businesses are tackling cybersecurity risks that span departments as diverse as finance, supply chain, and travel. Energy companies are coordinating global megaprojects, including the opening of new deep-sea resource fields. Transportation and logistics firms are tasked with getting resources from point A to point B on time, irrespective of how remote those points are or what is being delivered. Large-scale manufacturing and construction endeavors, such as aircraft and city infrastructure projects, require tight collaboration between those producing the work and the agencies regulating it. In such contexts, organizations can't rely on generalists to come up with comprehensive, end-to-end solutions. They must combine the contributions of experts with deep knowledge in various domains. (For more on this, see "Getting Your Stars to Collaborate," HBR, January–February 2017.)

Second, with crowded markets and reduced geographic and industry barriers, organizations now face greater pressure to keep costs down and stretch resources. One client manager in a professional services firm noted, "To be really good stewards of client dollars, we don't want to pay for five weeks of a specialist's time when what we really need is an intense effort from that person in week five." That's why "bench time" between projects and even slow periods during projects have become increasingly rare. The instant people are underutilized, their organizations put them to work on other things. In our research we found that even senior-level managers were flipping among seven or more projects in a single day—and as many as 25 in a given week. Compounding this, technology makes it easier to track downtime—even if it's just minutes—and assign employees work or loop them into projects during any lulls.

Third, organizational models are moving away from hierarchical, centralized staffing to give employees

IN BRIEF

THE PROS

By assigning people to multiple teams at once, organizations make efficient use of time and brainpower. They also do a better job of solving complex problems and sharing knowledge across groups.

THE CONS

Competing priorities and other conflicts can make it hard for teams with overlapping membership to stay on track. Group cohesion often suffers. And people who belong to many teams at once may experience burnout, which hurts engagement and performance.

THE FIXES

Leaders can mitigate these risks by building trust and familiarity through launches and skills mapping, identifying which groups are most vulnerable to shocks, improving coordination across teams, and carving out more opportunities for learning.



more choice in their projects and improve talent development, engagement, and retention. Indeed, in the gig economy, individuals have greater control than ever over the work they do (think open-source software programmers). This has made leading teams an even more critical skill. (For more on this, see “The Secrets of Great Teamwork,” HBR, June 2016.) At the same time, it has brought multitasking—and the associated risks—to a whole new level. More and more people have at-will contracts and work not only on multiple projects but for multiple organizations. In many cases, companies are sharing team members’ time and smarts with market rivals.

Although most managers recognize the increasing prevalence of multitasking, few have a complete understanding of how it affects their organizations, their teams, and individual employees. For instance, top leaders in one professional services firm were surprised to learn who in their organization was most squeezed by multitasking. First-year associates worked on as many as six projects in a week, which at a glance seemed like a lot. But the number rose steeply with tenure—employees worked on as many as 15 projects a week once they had reached the six-year mark. More-experienced people were members of fewer concurrent teams, but the more senior they got, the more likely they were to lead many projects at the same time. (See the exhibit “Who’s Feeling the Pain?”) Interviews revealed that working on multiple teams was stressful—one person likened it to being “slapped about” by different project leaders—despite benefits such as bringing lessons from one project to bear on others.

It’s a classic “blind men and elephant problem.” Managers see some of the benefits and some of the drawbacks firsthand but rarely all at once, because

those things play out through different mechanisms and at different levels. Imagine, for example, a sales manager who wants to provide better solutions for customers by incorporating insights from her team members’ experiences on other projects. That’s not going to happen if splitting each individual’s time across five projects means her team doesn’t have the bandwidth to sit down and share those great ideas in the first place. Or consider a project manager who is thinking about adding a third engineer to his team—just 10% of a full-time equivalent—to reduce the load on his two overworked lead engineers. He may not recognize that this sort of slicing and dicing is the reason his first two engineers are in danger of burnout—they are being pulled into too many competing projects. Examples like these abound.

For the most part, the benefits of multitasking involve efficiency and knowledge flow, while the costs are largely intra- or interpersonal and psychological. That may be why the costs are tracked and managed less closely, if at all—and why they so often undermine the benefits without leaders’ realizing it.

MANAGING THE CHALLENGES

Through our research and consulting, we have identified several ways that both team and organizational leaders can reduce the costs of multitasking and better capitalize on its benefits. We’ll outline them below.

Priorities for team leaders. Coordinating members’ efforts (both within and across teams) and promoting engagement and adaptability are the key challenges for team leaders. Focusing on those goals early on, before your team even meets for the first time, will help you establish stronger relationships, reduce coordination costs, ease the friction of transitions,

ward off political skirmishes, and identify risks so that you can better mitigate them. Here's how to do it:

Launch the team well to establish trust and familiarity. When fully dedicated to one team, people learn about their teammates' outside lives—family, hobbies, life events, and the like. This enables them to coordinate better (they know, for example, that one teammate is off-line during kids' bedtimes or that another routinely hits the gym during lunch). More important, it forges strong bonds and interpersonal trust, which team members need in order to seek and offer constructive feedback, introduce one another to valuable network connections, and rely on one another's technical expertise.

When multiteaming, in contrast, people tend to be hyperfocused on efficiency and are less inclined to share personal information. If you don't engineer personal interactions *for* them, chances are they'll be left with an anemic picture of their teammates, which can breed suspicion about why others fail to respond promptly, how committed they are to team outcomes, and so on. So make sure team members spend some time in the beginning getting to know their colleagues. This will also help far-flung contributors give one another the benefit of the doubt later on. A Boston-based designer told us about his British counterpart:

"I used to think that Sylvia was frosty and elitist, because she never jumped into our brainstorming sessions. Instead, she sent missives afterward, sometimes only to the project director. Then we spent a few days working together in person while I was in London, and I came to appreciate that she's an introvert who just needs time to process ideas before responding. Plus, because she had never met any of us, it was really hard for her to keep track of who had said what on the calls; she recognized only the leader's unique accent."

After the designer shared that "aha" with the team leader, the group switched to video calls so that everyone could see Sylvia's "thinking face" and she could feel confident that she was responding to the right people when making comments.

Formally launching the team—in person, if at all possible—helps a lot, especially if members open up about their own development goals. At McKinsey each team member, including the leader, explains how he or she expects to use that project to build or improve a critical skill. This level of openness not only encourages people to display some vulnerability (which is practically the definition of trust) but also gives members concrete ideas about how they can help one another.

The launch may feel like an unnecessary step if people know one another and everyone is ready to dive in, but research shows that team kickoffs can improve performance by up to 30%, in part because they increase peer-to-peer accountability. By clarifying

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Over the past 15 years, we've been measuring both the benefits and the trade-offs of multiteaming in areas such as human capital, resource utilization, quality management, and customer satisfaction. We have conducted:

IN-DEPTH STUDIES of eight global professional services firms where multiteaming is the norm, including statistical analyses of their staffing databases and personnel records.

A SURVEY of more than 500 midlevel managers in global companies, representing a wide range of industries and professions, to examine trends across organizations and geographies.

ONGOING RESEARCH at a 5,000-person technology and services company that is trying to optimize multiteaming. So far, this includes more than 50 interviews with team leaders and executives. We're also designing organizational experiments to test best practices and collect data on outcomes such as efficiency, staff burnout, and customer satisfaction.

ONGOING RESEARCH on agent-based modeling to understand the behavior of large systems of interconnected teams. We are also using simulations to model multiteaming, with a focus on understanding the relationship between team size, percentage of overlap among teams, and the number of teams each team member is on.

roles and objectives up front and establishing group norms, you're letting people know what to expect from their colleagues. That's needed on any team, of course, but it's especially critical in organizations where people belong to several teams at once and must absorb *many* sets of roles, objectives, and norms to do good work across the board.

On teams that people frequently join or leave, you'll need to periodically "re-kick" to onboard new members and assess whether agreed-upon processes and expectations still make sense. A good rule of thumb is to do this whenever 15% of the team has changed.

Map everyone's skills. Figure out the full portfolio of capabilities that each person brings to the project—both technical skills and broader kinds of knowledge, such as familiarity with the customer's decision-making process, or a knack for negotiation, or insights about an important target market. Make sure everyone knows how each teammate contributes. This increases the chances that members will learn from one another. The pride people take in sharing their knowledge and the cohesion fostered by peer mentoring are often as valuable as the actual knowledge shared.

As with launching, it's tempting to skip mapping if many members have worked together before. But we've found that even familiar teams are likely to hold outdated assumptions about individuals' potential contributions and often disagree about their teammates' expertise. As a result, they may argue about which roles members should play or bristle at assignments, thinking they're unfair or a bad fit. People may also waste time seeking outside resources when a teammate already has the needed knowledge, which demotivates those whose skills have been overlooked.

Sherif, a tax expert, experienced these problems when he joined with four colleagues to pitch a new client. "We'd all worked together on prior projects over the years—enough, we assumed, to know one another's 'sweet spots,'" he told us. "Over time, though, I grew more and more frustrated that two of my partners kept adding bits of regulatory advice to the pitch document—that's why I was on the team! I was handling nearly the exact same issue for a current client. I felt undermined, and the more they tried to sideline me, the more cantankerous I got." A few days before the client meeting, the group talked it out and discovered that Sherif had been honing his specialist expertise on projects the others hadn't been part of. They simply didn't realize what he had to offer. "We'd all been running in so many directions at the same time that our individual knowledge was changing quickly," he says. "No wonder we had friction."

Skills mapping could have prevented this. It also streamlines communication (no need to "reply all" if you know who's actually responsible for an issue). And it equips members to hold one another accountable for high-quality, on-time delivery, which is otherwise

tricky when people are frequently coming and going. Creating the expectation of peer accountability relieves you as the team leader from some of that day-to-day oversight, freeing you up to scan the environment for potential shocks from other teams, for example, or to handle some of the inevitable negotiations about shared resources.

Manage time across teams. As you form a team, explicitly talk about everyone's competing priorities up front. By preemptively identifying crunch periods across projects, you can revamp deadlines or plan on spending more hands-on time yourself at certain points. Making the topic "discussable" so that people won't feel guilty about conflicts allows the team to openly and productively handle these issues when they come up later.

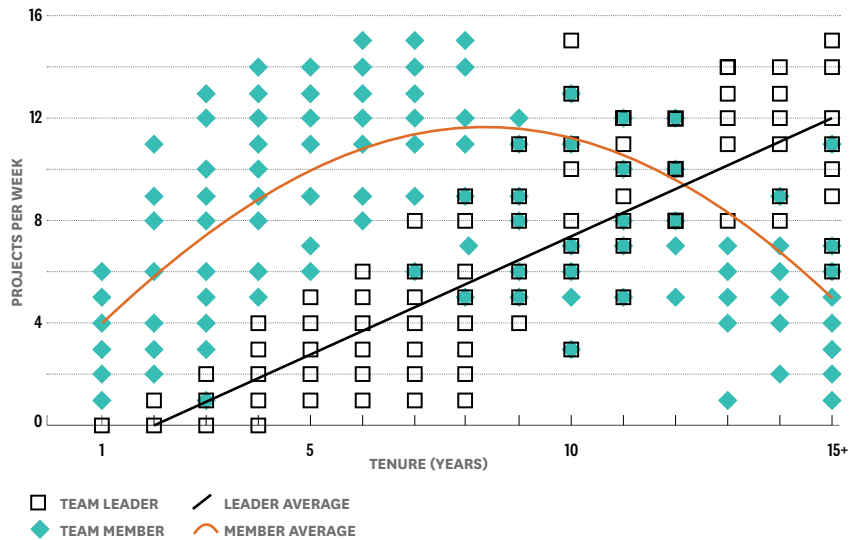
Establishing the right rhythm of meetings will make it easier to manage time across teams and address competing priorities. At the outset, you'll want to schedule several full-team meetings at critical junctures. (Research shows, for instance, that the halfway point in any project is a vital moment for a check-in, because that's when people shift into a higher gear, acutely aware that their time is limited.) Make attendance truly mandatory, and ensure it by giving each team member a piece of the meetings to run—even if it's just for 10 minutes. Check in early to see that all members have cleared meeting dates with their other teams. Ideally, the organizational culture will support formal check-in meetings as a high priority. If not, you may need to coordinate with other team leaders before putting a schedule together.

When you plan other team meetings, invite exactly who's needed and no one else, to minimize scheduling conflicts with other teams. Most of the time, you won't need everyone. Meet in subteams whenever possible. Don't forget to leverage technology: Instead of using precious live meeting time for updates, send a three-line e-mail or keep an online dashboard updated so that people can track progress as needed. Although technology doesn't replace face-to-face interaction, it can tide you over when a full meeting is too costly. And be creative: Younger team members are more likely to watch a 30-second video update than to read a two-page memo. Brief, spontaneous check-ins with team members over Skype or FaceTime can keep you updated on their competing deadlines; this visual interaction makes it more likely that you'll pick up cues about their stress and motivation levels, too.

Create a learning environment. Learning makes work feel more meaningful, and it's supposed to be a major benefit of multiteaming—but it often gets crowded out by time pressures. There are other obstacles as well: Even if you've worked to build trust and personal connections, it's harder for multiteamers to give effective feedback than it is for dedicated team members, because people whose time is divided

WHO'S FEELING THE PAIN?

At one professional services firm, the employees most squeezed by multiteaming were mid-tenure associates—they helped with more and more projects as they gained experience. But the more senior people became, the more likely they were to lead many projects at the same time.



among several projects are less likely to regularly observe their teammates' actions or to be present at a time that "feels right" to offer critiques. Members who see only a small slice of a project may lack the context to fully understand what kind of feedback is appropriate. They also tend to focus on short-term tasks and to communicate with one another only when required.

Carrie, for example, was promoted to run the development office of a major metropolitan hospital, and her new 20-person staff was splitting its time among dozens of projects each week. After six months she realized, "We were all living in a feedback desert. I literally hadn't had a single comment in half a year about how I could do my job better, despite clear examples of projects that hadn't lived up to expectations." To change the tone, she modeled seeking input and responding to it constructively. "Doing so day in and day out, I started to create an environment where people shared their concerns to get help as soon as they needed it," she says. "Over time, it felt safe enough to put in more-formal processes to review projects and allow everyone to learn from errors without fear of retribution or blame."

You can also designate team members from different functions or offices to colead parts of the project so that they benefit from greater cross-contact; a formal assignment makes it more likely that they'll devote time to learning from each other. Similarly, pair a highly experienced team member with someone more junior and help them understand what both can

GOALS OF MULTITEAMING

(AND THE CHALLENGES THAT CAN UNDERMINE THEM)

GOALS FOR TEAMS	CHALLENGES
<p>COST SAVINGS, because team members whose expertise is not required at the moment can bill their downtime to other projects</p> <p>PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS as a result of importing best practices and insights through shared members</p>	<p>Weakened relationships and coherence within teams and projects</p> <p>Stress and burnout, particularly when members end up with assignments that exceed 100% time commitment</p> <p>Inter-team coordination costs so that schedules of projects with shared members don't collide</p> <p>Rocky transitions as members switch between tasks where their contributions are defined relative to other members' skills, adjust to different roles (boss on one team but subordinate on another), and learn new team contexts with unfamiliar routines, symbols, jokes, expectations, tolerance for ambiguity, and so on</p> <p>Reduced learning, because members lack time together to share knowledge and ideas</p> <p>Reduced motivation, because members have a small percentage of their time dedicated to any given project</p>
GOALS FOR ORGANIZATIONS	CHALLENGES
<p>THE CAPABILITY TO SOLVE COMPLEX PROBLEMS with members who have deep, specialized knowledge</p> <p>IMPROVED RESOURCE UTILIZATION across projects (no one is dedicated to a project that needs only 5% of his or her time)</p> <p>INCREASED KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER and learning through shared membership</p>	<p>Politics and tensions over shared human resources</p> <p>Coordination costs of aligning timelines of projects even when they are not linked by content or workflow</p> <p>Weakened identification with the organization if people feel commoditized</p> <p>Increased risk as shocks affecting one team may pull shared members off other projects</p>

gain from the exchange—it's not just one-way learning flowing down to the junior person.

Foster curiosity by posing "What if...?" questions when it's likely that different members' backgrounds will provide new insights. If you get a question that you know another member could answer more fully, given his or her experience, redirect the asker and prompt the expert to do a bit of tutoring.

Boost motivation. On traditional, fixed teams, a strong sense of cohesion and group identity motivates members. But leaders in multiteaming environments need to leverage more of an exchange relationship. The ability to get jazzed about a project naturally flags when members spend only a small amount of time on

it. Their inner accountant asks, "If I'll get only 10% of the credit, how much time and effort should I devote to this?" Figure out what your ten-percenters really value and frame the work in terms of those rewards. For example, if you have a Millennial who is eager to develop transferable skills, you might occasionally take time during meetings to have team members share and learn something new, or hold a workshop at the end of the project in which members cross-train.

Remember, too, that a sense of fairness drives many behaviors. If people feel they are pulling their weight while others slack off, they quickly become demotivated. When team members are tugged in many directions, it's often difficult for each one to recognize and appreciate how hard the others are working. As the leader, keep publicly acknowledging various members' contributions so that they become visible to the whole team, spawning a greater awareness of the collective efforts.

Like Christine, the frustrated leader of the Analytix software team, you might be feeling the strain of sharing valuable talent with other teams. Before you reach the breaking point, take these steps to clarify and manage your interdependency with other teams. They will help you avoid conflicts when that's possible, defuse them when it's not, and set an example of better collaboration with other team leaders—peers who face the same challenges you do.

Priorities for organizational leaders. If you're leading an organization where multiteaming is prevalent, you'll need to keep a close eye on how—and how many—members are shared across teams. We've found that you can reduce organizational risk and boost innovation by following these steps:

Map and analyze human capital interdependence. Patterns of team overlap range from highly concentrated (a large proportion of members are shared by just a few teams) to highly dispersed (the sharing is spread out across many teams).

Each pattern has its own implications for risk management. When a surprise problem jolts one team, the cry "All hands on deck" pulls shared members off their other teams—with disproportionately large effects on teams that have a concentrated overlap in members. When the overlap is more dispersed, the shock will be felt by more teams but to a lesser extent by each one. (See the exhibit "Who Takes the Hit?")

There are implications for knowledge transfer as well. Best practices travel from one project to the next as team members share what's working—and what isn't—on their other projects. Highly concentrated overlap makes it easier to spread ideas from one team to another; highly dispersed overlap makes it easier to spread them to more teams.

Keep an accurate map of the links among teams in your organization through periodic updates from managers and team members. The frequency of these check-ins will depend on the life cycles of your teams.

You'll need them more often if teams and assignments change week to week, less often if you've got yearlong projects with stable membership. This bird's-eye view will help you see which teams fail to pick up on new trends because they're too isolated, for instance, and which are so tightly interconnected that they aren't mitigating the risks of their shared membership.

The question we get most often about mapping interdependence is "What's the right amount?" Unfortunately, there's no magic answer—either for overlap between teams or for the number of teams per individual. Both targets depend highly on context. When teams are very similar in their tasks and culture, transitioning between them is relatively easy, so you can have a large amount of overlap and members can be on more of them. Transitioning across teams with very different tasks or cultures should be kept to a minimum, however—it's a bigger, costlier shift. Interestingly, the reverse holds true when workloads differ across teams, because members aren't in high demand from all teams at the same time (they aren't as susceptible to burnout as, say, tax advisers in April are).

Once you've done all this analysis, it's time to address the shortcomings you've uncovered—which brings us to the next two steps.

Promote knowledge flows. Pay close attention to teams that share few or no members with others—whether that's by design or by accident. These "islands" will require help staying informed about what's working elsewhere in the organization, sharing their knowledge and ideas, and deciding who would be the best resource to apply to a given task.

Your goal here is to establish knowledge transfer as a cultural norm, which involves getting employees to recognize that everyone wins when they take the time to share insights across projects. As with any cultural shift, it's important to lead by example and to reward those who follow suit. That's simple to say—but not so simple to do. To make it easier, highlight the benefits of sharing, and provide processes and technology to facilitate it, such as brown-bag lunches and online forums. One tech firm we worked with made a point of celebrating project breakthroughs that were attributed to transferred best practices. R&D teams at a manufacturing company shared monthly testimonials from individuals who had gained new insights through cross-staffing. In both cases the objective was to make the benefits of knowledge transfer clear—and to counter the ever-present pressure for people to keep their heads down and focus on immediate tasks.


Buffer against shocks. How can you prevent shocks in one team from being transmitted to others? Often you can't—but knowing how teams are connected through shared membership allows you to anticipate *where* some shocks may be transferred and to design small amounts of slack into the system to absorb them. This doesn't mean having people sit around twiddling their thumbs just in case. Rather, you're


enabling them to shift their attention when needed. One engineering firm we worked with had identified several skilled "firefighters" and assigned them to long-term projects that wouldn't suffer if they had to address urgent problems elsewhere. This had the added benefit of providing those individuals with exciting challenges that were a welcome change of pace from their day-to-day work.

It takes a critical eye and a clear set of strategic priorities to determine which projects can be disrupted and which can't. Sometimes it makes sense to give certain projects "protected" status, exempting members of those teams from answering others' firefighting calls. Overall, the idea is to be responsive to immediate problems without sacrificing teams' ongoing needs. Of course, even if you've built slack into team design, you may occasionally have to jump in with extra resources to save critical projects that take a hit. But your other teams will feel less pain when you do.

None of this is easy. You may need to work with HR or IT to establish processes or systems that will allow you to track multiteaming more accurately across the organization. You may even need to create a new role to define and coordinate these efforts effectively. And people may resist the increased oversight—it can feel like micromanagement to team leaders and members who are accustomed to having freer rein, particularly in entrepreneurial cultures. Still, in the end such investments are worthwhile; it's actually more costly to allow the trade-offs of multiteaming to go unchecked. If you're open about the problems you're trying to solve with all this transparency, people are less likely to feel surveilled or constrained by it and more likely to see the upside.

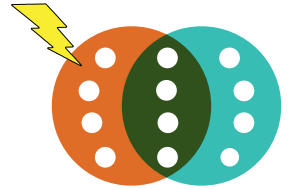
NEARLY EVERY KNOWLEDGE worker these days is a member of multiple concurrent teams. Together, organizational and team leaders can make the most of that trend by creating an environment where multiteamers will thrive. Some of this involves managing interdependence risks, articulating and navigating groups' competing priorities, and removing obstacles to strategic coordination across groups. And some entails building stronger connections and greater trust among people who spend only a small fraction of their time together.

All around, it's a significant investment of time and effort. But organizations pay a much higher price when they neglect the costs of multiteaming in hot pursuit of its benefits.  **HBR Reprint R1705C**

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WHO TAKES THE HIT?

When a couple of teams share many members, a shock to one group severely jolts the other, because people shift their efforts from ongoing work to firefighting.



When many teams share just one or two members, a shock to one group has a minor impact on the others—but the effects ripple throughout the organization.

