

How Workers Allocate their Time between Challenging Tasks and Routine Tasks

A Regulatory Focus Perspective

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Abstract

Employees in today's organizations often need to perform challenging and creative tasks but at the same time they need to complete routine tasks and requirements. Both type of tasks are vital to the organization's survival, but given lack of resources, employees and managers must decide how to allocate their limited resources (e.g., time, effort) between these tasks.

The distinction between challenging tasks and routine tasks has been introduced by Van Dijk & Kluger (2011), which based their classification on Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998). This classification of tasks distinguishes between tasks that required creativity and are "eagerly" done versus tasks that required accuracy and are "vigilantly" done. Specifically, challenging tasks include exerting creative thoughts, generating ideas, challenging decision making and creative problem solving, while routine tasks includes bookkeeping, detecting errors, budget planning and maintaining safety.

In the current work we sought to explore how people plan to allocate their time between challenging tasks and routines at work and does regulatory focus (i.e., promotion focus versus prevention focus) moderate the allocation pattern. We hypothesized that (H1) on average more resources will be allocated to routine tasks at work, than to challenging tasks; (H2) under promotion focus the gap between the two task-types will be smaller than under prevention focus.

One hundred and thirty two undergraduates (74% women; Mean age = 25.5) were asked to plan how they would allocate their time (100%) between eight tasks: four of them were pre classified as challenging tasks (e.g., generating ideas, initiating change), while the other four were pre classified as routine tasks (e.g., budgeting, supervision and control). The participants were asked to allocate 100% time units between the eight tasks. To each of the tasks the participants were asked to decide how much time (out of 100%) they plan to allocate. Regulatory focus was manipulated using the Maze manipulation (Friedman & Forster, 2001) before performing the resource-allocation assignment. In addition, regulatory focus was measured as an individual tendency using the General Regulatory Focus Measure (Lockwood et al., 2002) at the beginning of the study.

The results show that people chose to allocate about 60% of their resources to routine tasks, while the remaining 40% was allocated to challenging tasks, supporting H1. In addition, we found that prevention focus moderated this ratio, such that the lower the prevention level

(chronic and induced), the higher the allocation to challenging tasks. Yet, the allocation to challenge tasks rarely exceeded 50% of the resources.

Allocation of a sound amount of time to challenging tasks is important for managers and organizations who seek to increase creativity, innovation, and self-fulfillment of workers (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; DeDreu, Baas, & Nijstad, 2011; Förster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004; Van Dijk & Kluger, 2011). And it also has a positive effect on employees' well-being (Van Dijk & Peer, 2015). In order to reduce the tendency of workers to allocate more time to requirements and routines, managers and leaders should emphasize promotion-focused messages and to deliver a promotional vision to their employees.

Our findings could be especially relevant for organizations where success is contingent on creative efforts toward innovative ideas. Since this type of organization is becoming more and more prevalent, we encourage organizations to take the allocation effect into account, and find interventions that will affect the allocation process in a way that organizations will be less preoccupied with their necessities and more focused on attaining challenges and aspirations.

Keywords: regulatory focus theory, promotion focus, prevention focus, resource allocation, challenging tasks

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