

Decision Fatigue: Combatting the Overwhelming Nature of Choices

People make a total of about 35,000 decisions—in a single day. The process of decision-making has become a more natural, passive activity over time, with decisions like what socks to wear and how long to microwave leftovers barely fazing people as decisions. Decisions with grander consequences weigh more on individuals, from what car best fits a specific set of needs to how much credit a customer should be extended.

With so many decisions in one day, each choice begins to lay heavy on a person. Without realizing it, the overwhelming nature of these decisions contribute to a phenomenon known as “decision fatigue.” The breakout session “Understanding Decision Fatigue (and What to Do About It)” at the 2019 Western Credit Conference in Portland, Oregon, tackled this issue, breaking down what decision fatigue is, how it affects creditors in the workplace and how best to overcome it.

Speaker Erin Blair, founder of Phoenix Consulting, defined decision fatigue as making lower-quality, less thoughtful decisions after a long period of decision-making. This long period can refer to the end of the day, the end of the week or after making a series of particularly difficult choices.

“To know this is the time when your willpower is going to be at its lowest,” Blair said. “... Practicing is really building self-awareness to what’s really going on.”

Blair said most people are freshest in the morning, allowing them to be able to make decisions more directly and clearly. The beginning of the day also signals the beginning of a day of decision-making, meaning less choices have had the chance to overwhelm someone. This also translates to the beginning of the week: Talking with customers and sitting down for meetings becomes a more pleasant and simple process when the week is new, the next several days open to infinite possibilities.

The notion of being most alert and the least fatigued in the beginning of the week works for most people—but it doesn’t work for everyone. Planning calls with a customer before a cup of coffee on a Monday morning may be exhausting for one person while being optimal for someone else. Blair emphasized the importance of self-awareness when it comes to decision fatigue: scheduling big decisions around a personal mental health calendar can create a better headspace in the office.

“If I wait until the next morning, we can make a much better decision,” Blair said. “Later in the day, we’re more reactionary and say, ‘What do you want?!’ without the smile.”

Checking in and “finding your anchor” can ease understanding of how each mind works. Taking a few extra seconds to ask, “Am I doing OK?” can drastically change the outlook of someone. Blair suggests asking this question when clinging to an anchor: something that lives in a neutral space, completely removed from the decision itself.

For Blair, taking a few minutes to wash her hands gives her the time to check in. For others, this can mean leaving the desk to get a drink of water, going to the restroom, etc. An anchor, like decision fatigue, is different for every person.

In the final practice of self-awareness, Blair advises to step back from decisions entirely if decision fatigue begins to set in. Telling someone “I’ll get back to you” is not rude, rather, it makes for a more thoughtful, genuine decision.

“When we’re in those moments, it’s difficult to check in and practice self-care,” Blair said. “... A new default could be saying ‘This looks like a hard decision. I’m going to postpone it.’ We can postpone a decision and say, ‘can I get back to you?’ if we’re feeling too fatigued.”

—Christie Citranglo, editorial associate