THE INEFFICIENCY OF WORKER TIME USE

Decio Coviello  
HEC Montreal

Andrea Ichino  
European University Institute  
and University of Bologna

Nicola Persico  
Kellogg School of Management,  
Northwestern University

Abstract
Much work is carried out in short, interrupted segments. This phenomenon, which we label task juggling, has been overlooked by economists. We study the work schedules of some judges in Italy documenting that they do juggle tasks and that juggling causally lowers their productivity substantially. To measure the size of this effect, we show that although all these judges receive the same workload, those who juggle more trials at once instead of working sequentially on few of them at each unit of time, take longer to complete their portfolios of cases. Task juggling seems to have no adverse effect on the quality of the judges’ decisions, as measured by the percent of decisions appealed. To identify these causal effects we estimate models with judge fixed effects and we exploit the lottery assigning cases to judges. We discuss whether task juggling can be viewed as inefficient, and provide a back-of-the-envelope calculation of the social cost of longer trials due to task juggling.

(JEL: J0; K0; M5)

Keywords: Individual production function, work scheduling, duration of trials.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank seminar participants at the Bank of Italy, the CEPR Public Policy meeting 2010, the NBER Summer Institute 2009, NBER Organizational Economics Workshop 2013 in Stanford, the WPEG 2009 conference, Bocconi University, European University Institute, LSE, MIT, Oxford, Royal Holloway, Timbergen Institute, Universities of Bologna, Bonn, Southampton, UPF and Utrecht. Manuel Arellano, Daniell Li, Francesco Manaresi, Giovanni Pica and Alfonso Rosolia gave us useful advise in several discussions. We are also grateful to the Labor Court of Milan for making the data available and we acknowledge financial support from MIUR-PRIN 2009 project 2009MAATFS_001.

E-mail: decio.coviello@hec.ca (Coviello); andrea.ichino@eui.eu (Ichino);  
nicola@nicolapersico.com (Persico)