

HOW TO COMBAT PROCRASTINATION AT WORK

Bernice Maune

October 22, 2013



Is putting things off robbing you of potential work opportunities?

Have you been overlooked for promotions because you tend to put off finishing the task at hand? Then read on as executive coach Penny Holburn explains how you can overcome this thief of time.

What are the causes of procrastination?

People procrastinate because they hate what they are supposed to be doing. Our brains are designed to avoid doing whatever it is we don't like. So it takes a lot of effort to do something we don't like doing.

We can also procrastinate because of fear. If there is something about the task we fear doing, or consequences we fear, we will find ways to put it off. For example, a fear of rejection could result in someone delaying to make a sales call, as they could be rejected.

Procrastination can also become a habit. You can get used to putting something off and the more you put it off the harder it becomes to eventually do it. If the task seems too overwhelming and we see a possibility that we could fail in some way we will also put it off. People also procrastinate because of a lack of faith in their ability to do the task. And perfectionists can also procrastinate because they never see the task as done well enough to be finished. It always needs to be improved in some way.

What questions can people ask themselves to discover the source of their procrastination?

Why am I putting off this task?
What are the consequences for me of doing this task?
What is the payoff for me of not doing this task?
Is there something I am afraid of?
Do I want to do this task?
Am I doing this task to benefit someone else?
Am I tired and overwhelmed at the moment?
Am I stressed out or burned out?
Do I often put off doing these types of tasks?
Why am I really putting off this task?
What story am I telling myself about why this task can wait?
Do I believe I can do this task?
Do I know how to do this task?
Do I need to get help in order to do this task?

How does procrastination affect productivity in the workplace?

When you are getting less done, your productivity will be affected. Procrastination affects those around you as well, meaning they are also more likely to procrastinate. In a work environment where everyone just gets on with the job it is more likely that people will not procrastinate. Even if you are likely to put off doing work, if everyone around you gets on with the task when they get it, it becomes a habit eventually.

Procrastination also affects productivity in that once you procrastinate and the work piles up, more time and energy is spent worrying about how you are eventually going to do the work than getting on and doing it. So time is wasted procrastinating and then time is wasted worrying about the huge load of work you now have to get through.

If left unattended, what are the consequences of procrastination?

Like just about everything else, procrastination becomes a habit. And if lots of people in the business do it, it can even become part of the culture. The results are that work is left unattended or forgotten, and clients and colleagues have to wait longer for responses.

Once the cause of procrastination has been identified, what steps can one take to deal with it?

It depends on the cause. If you are tired and burned out, then take a break. If you are fearful then deal with the fear. Sometimes that means just doing it. If you have developed a habit of procrastinating then you need to break that habit, which means creating a new habit of doing the work as soon as you get it.

If you don't like the task and you have to do it, see if you can link it to some benefit for yourself – for instance, making that dreaded sales call may mean getting rejected, but it could also mean more money for you to buy your dream house one day. You could also get an accountability partner and hold each other accountable for getting work done by the end of the day. Every time you don't procrastinate, reward yourself.

What strategies can one adopt to prevent procrastination taking over again in future?

There are quite a lot of methods you can use, it depends on what works for each person. You can try one or a combination of the following:

- Have a task list for the day – one task list, not hundreds. Be accountable to someone. Just having someone to report to at the end of the day can be a huge help.
- Break the tasks down and focus on these smaller segments. This works very well when the task is daunting.

- Start with the most difficult task first thing in the morning.
- Reward yourself at the end of the day for completing tasks.
- Run a competition – with yourself or others – with a prize for someone who finishes their tasks.
- Tell yourself that you only have to work on it for 10 minutes. Once those 10 minutes are up most people are happy to carry on. Clients tell me this works really well for them.
- Visualise yourself with a huge amount of outstanding work to do and visualise the horrible consequences of this.
- The minute you get the work assigned to you just go and do it.
- Do daily and weekly planning.

If being disorganised is the cause of procrastination, what are some of the ways to get organised?

- Do daily and weekly planning.
- Rather than start lots of tasks, start a few tasks and finish them before moving on to others. Lots of incomplete tasks drains energy.
- Structure your day with breaks in them.
- Work at the times of the day when you are most productive.
- Make a list (one list) and stick to it. Cross off items as you finish them. Keep a manageable number of items on your list.
- Prioritise items. Most people have more work to do than time to do it in.
- Batch items – this means doing similar tasks at the same time, rather than jumping around, unless it is critical to your job to do so. For example, do all your emails together, make all your phone calls at the same time, and run all your errands together.
- Be focused during the day. Save chatting for breaks.
- Don't take on work that is the responsibility of others and learn to say no.
- Set yourself deadlines and use the OHIO rule – Only Handle It Once.