

The Business Brain

Breaking free of the urge to dawdle

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What makes humans uniquely human? Is it language, the ability to make moral choices, to empathize, or to imagine the future?

Actually, it's much more mundane. If there is any activity common to all, it's procrastination. We try to think of what lies ahead. Yet we routinely put off tasks that we could do today, even though getting them done would bring us closer to our goals. Whether it's making a critical phone call or putting the finishing touches on a project, we often don't do what we plan to do. Procrastination is irrational, yet we all do it.

What would work to counteract this very human trait?

To explore how procrastination works, Dan Ariely, a behavioural economist at Duke University and author (most recently, *The Upside of Irrationality*) and Klaus Wertenbroch, a professor at the French business school INSEAD, conducted a three-pronged experiment involving students at MIT.

In one class, students were given a choice about deadlines for assignments. They could either hand in three papers on the last day of class, when everything would be graded; or they could set three staggered deadlines for themselves. But if they chose to set specific deadlines, and then submitted a paper late, they would be penalized.

Choosing the last possible submission time, which had the least chance of penalty, was clearly the more rational position. But nearly 75 per cent of the students set their own deadlines, even though they risked compromising their grades if papers were late. They knew they might procrastinate if they didn't make a commitment at the start.

In a second class, students were told that all three papers were due on the final day; they were welcome to hand in assignments earlier, but nothing would be graded until the end of the term. A third group of students were given non-negotiable, fixed deadlines.

In general, the students with strict assigned deadlines came out on top in terms of performance and grades. Next came the ones who gave themselves staggered deadlines. In last place: the students who had a final-day deadline.

The results suggest that imposed deadlines, even if arbitrary or artificial, help keep procrastination in check. "Tightly restricting freedom is the best cure for procrastination," Prof. Ariely said.

This makes sense if you are managing other people. But how do you control procrastination in yourself, when goals and cutoff points can be moving targets? He suggests committing to goals by adopting a "Ulysses pact." Ulysses knew he would be tempted by the sirens' singing, so he asked his crew to tie him to the ship's mast while he was still rational, so he wouldn't be able to follow his impulses later.

Prof. Ariely is testing how this might work with men who procrastinate about having colonoscopies. Would they be willing to "bind" themselves to having the procedure by writing a \$500 cheque, which would be ripped up when they keep the appointment? More than half his subjects have written the cheque, though he doesn't know how many will end up paying the price of their procrastination.

His suggested procrastination busters: divide your tasks into smaller chunks; make your deadlines public; reward yourself when you meet a target; adopt strict habits. "Runners run every day; they do it because it's a rule," he noted. "If you say you'll run 20 days out of a month, you're never sure which days it will be."

And last but not least, to avoid procrastination, turn off e-mail and the Internet. "The biggest productivity killer these days are e-mail and Facebook," said Prof. Ariely. He is looking for a company willing to black out e-mail and Internet for a set period, to assess whether it boosts productivity. So far, he hasn't found any volunteers. Any takers?

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*