

# Instead of read this

**If procrastination is irrational  
and against our better  
interests, why are so many  
of us procrastinators and  
can we change?**

*by* KEVIN ORRMAN-ROSSITER

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## article

**I** THUMBED through a number of science and business magazines on my desk, checked my emails, Facebook and twitter messages, looked to see if there were any new comments on my blog postings, and then finally started writing this article. Does that seem vaguely familiar?

More than likely it does, as it describes procrastination, a habit that many of us find ourselves doing and find frustrating, and possibly even annoying, when others engage in it. It has many factors and manifestations, but there are certain ways to moderate its impact on you.

So what is procrastination? Let's describe it as the act of replacing high-priority actions with tasks of low-priority, and thus putting off important tasks to a later time. This can be as simple as putting aside an article on socially important issues and instead reading a gossip or sports magazine, delaying preparing your tax return, or delaying making an important policy decision that will affect countless people.

It would seem from the above description that procrastination is irrational; common-sense would tell us that it should not be an issue as we should focus on the high-priority actions and important tasks. It is however surprisingly common and an almost universal human behaviour. An experienced HR

manager in the financial services/broking industry described it as one of the top two or three factors that affect productivity in the industry. Because of its universality and impact in many aspects of our lives, procrastination gains interest from a wide range of people, including economists, neuroscientists and philosophers in addition to those directly involved in the management and improvement of human performance.

Let's just pause for a moment and think about the possible downsides of procrastination. If we assume that the tasks are important, then not taking high-priority actions will result in some negative outcomes

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TOLL AND CITIBANK

for us, and probably others. It is reasonably obvious, therefore, that procrastination may result in severe loss of personal and societal productivity. It can also result in personal stress, a sense of guilt and crisis, as well as social disapproval for not meeting responsibilities or commitments. These feelings combined may promote further procrastination. While it is regarded as normal for people to procrastinate to some degree, it becomes a problem when it impedes normal functioning.

All of this is supported by psychological studies, particularly at the level of chronic procrastination. Chronic procrastination is where a person procrastinates about nearly all facets of their life and may be a sign of an underlying psychological disorder. Then there are the more 'everyday' aspects of procrastination.

Procrastination is a broader issue than it initially seems. It can include: being reluctant to take risks or try something new; staying in the same old job; getting sick when faced with an unpleasant job; avoiding confrontations or decisions; blaming others or the situation (“it's boring”) for your unhappiness or to avoid doing something; making big plans but never carrying them out; and/or having such a busy social-recreational calendar that it is hard to get important work done. As this list of symptoms suggests, although procrastination first seems like a

simple behaviour, it is in fact quite complex. It involves emotions, skills, thoughts, attitudes, and factors that we are sometimes unaware of.

*The Thief of Time*, edited by Chrisoula Andreou and Mark D White, is a collection of essays on procrastination ranging from the resolutely theoretical to the surprisingly practical. The various authors argue that the tendency to procrastinate raises fundamental philosophical and psychological issues. Apart from the psychological and workplace tolls already mentioned, philosophers are interested in procrastination for another reason. It is a powerful example of what the Greeks called *akrasia* – doing something against one's own better judgment.

So again let's pose the question, if procrastination is against our better interests or judgement why do so many people do it? One reason can be that the task we are seemingly procrastinating over may not be a high-priority task – at least not to us. Frank Ford, director of Toll and Citibank and former managing partner at Deloitte, has observed that one cause of procrastination in business

is “lack of a clearly articulated and communicated strategy”. Furthermore, he says: “If people don't have a clear understanding of the direction, they will delay actions to avoid [subsequent] criticism or conflict.”

This last comment highlights one very important facet of procrastination – that of avoidance procrastination. This is characterised by delays related to fears of failure or success and contrasts with “arousal” procrastination, where delay is motivated by a “last-minute” thrill experience. It is worth looking at these two facets of procrastination by examining real-life examples (with changed names) in some detail to highlight the behavioural patterns and practical solutions to procrastination in the workplace.

Jenny is an experienced and well qualified professional who is general manager of a semi-independent arm of a national business. She is in an autonomous position and her remit is to grow a new business. When we first began working with Jenny she described how she was “continually delaying getting the business going”. She found she “lacked the focus to successfully get it under way”; instead she

found herself “needing to unwind and relax, take it easy for the afternoon, for example, and start afresh in the morning – or maybe tomorrow”. Her “relaxing” was temporary and ineffective, and led to even more stress as self-imposed business deadlines were pushed further out. As the deadlines passed Jenny felt increasingly guilty and apprehensive. This behaviour had become a cycle of failure and delay, as plans and goals were put off, pencilled into the following day or week in the diary again and again. This business procrastination also had a deleterious impact on her personal and social life as she found herself withdrawing from her social life, avoiding contact even with close friends.

Jenny, however, was unrealistic about time and was uncertain about the paths to attaining her business vision. Although capable of making sound decisions, she procrastinated over making them. This procrastination in turn led to uncertainty, a feeling of lost opportunity, and a sense of frustration in the rest of the business. In practice, Jenny's behaviour had become quite self-destructive. She felt even more overwhelmed with

the pressure from procrastination, which led to further procrastination.

Jenny needed to become more self-aware about the extent and impact of her behaviour, particularly her procrastination. This stage where you “become self-aware so that you know you are procrastinating, is critical”, according to Katie McKenzie, human resources manager at Hall & Wilcox Lawyers. It’s a necessary starting point to “enable you to come up with strategies to address the procrastination”.

With this self-awareness we worked with her to reappraise the importance of the business goal, which meant she could then define a meaningful way to prioritise her activities and make some realistic timeframes to work to; and made a commitment to achieve these. These steps were all critical as they gave her the focus to make good quality decisions and know that they were quality decisions. People within the business became more engaged as quality decisions were made in a timely manner and because she was being seen to be focused on the appropriate areas of the business.

In contrast to Jenny, Murray is what can be termed an arousal procrastinator. He came from a front-line sales background where he was an incredibly successful account manager in the information technology services sector. As a senior-level manager, however, he had difficulty delivering his projects. He tended to see them as ‘wholes’, rather than breaking them up into smaller tasks, and delayed starting because of this. He then tried to deliver them at the last minute.

Much to his line manager’s and team’s frustration and annoyance, he did not appear to be worried about the work deadlines. He created dissent in his team by expecting that they would work in a manner similar to his. Furthermore, as Murray actively avoided situations that would cause discomfort, indulging instead in more enjoyable activities, he delegated all tedious or mundane tasks to his team, leaving all the interesting ones for himself. In late high school this behaviour was already a habit; procrastinating over his homework but always ready for a social outing, he developed a strong habit of instant gratification

## Tips for reducing your procrastination

- ✓ Make sure that the task you seem to be procrastinating over is a high-priority task. Ensure that you have a clear vision and that you are communicating it effectively
- ✓ Develop mindfulness about your habits, become aware, and ask others what they notice
- ✓ Develop business-wide practices that support focus and attention. Understand when you (and others) work most efficiently and effectively
- ✓ Prioritise your time by chunking it
- ✓ Remove modern technology distractions such as email, twitter, phones, etc, during key times
- ✓ Start early on important tasks – especially if your environment is one where you can expect interruptions as part of normal business
- ✓ Practise your good practices

from an early age, while avoiding tasks that he did not enjoy.

Murray needed to develop habits that led to more self-discipline and using his time in a thoughtful manner. He also needed to develop an understanding of, and empathy with, other people's preferences and motivations. Establishing new habits meant that he felt more motivated about the tasks at hand and that he removed distractions. For example, for defined periods of the day he now shuts off emails and social media, and lets phone calls go to voicemail, then attends to these at organised times so these are not used as causes of distraction and procrastination.

While it can be seen from these two examples that the solutions have similarities, success required tailoring these to the individuals and their specific work contexts. This successful approach to mitigating the impact of procrastination is supported by a growing understanding of the psychological and neurological causes of procrastination.

The psychological theories underpinning procrastination are in still under debate, and much of the research has focused on either

chronic procrastination or specific procrastination (ie, single task studies done in a clinical or laboratory setting). Psychological studies have highlighted the relevance of the arousal and avoidance models of procrastination. Other clinical work has suggested that there is a connection between procrastination and issues of self-worth and anxiety, sometimes interpreted as perfectionism. Alternatively other work raises reasonable doubt that perfectionism is a root cause of procrastination in most cases.

Research around the neurological roots of procrastination has focused on the role played by the prefrontal cortex. This is the very front of the human brain, associated with the more complex aspects of planning and executing behaviour. Neuroscience studies have shown that damage or low activation in the prefrontal cortex can reduce an individual's ability to filter out distracting stimuli, ultimately resulting in poorer organisation, a loss of attention and increased procrastination. At this stage there are no neuroscience studies, that we are aware of, addressing procrastination specifically. The studies have focused

on the more general area of understanding the neuroscience of 'attention' and 'focus'. This accords with the examples of Jenny and Murray, showing that part of the solution in each case was to reduce the distracting stimuli, and to develop new congruent habits around organisation, attention and focus.

However, it is not enough just to teach people mental tricks – the real challenge is turning those tricks into habits, and that may require years of diligent practice. This is where congruence of behaviour is important. What we have looked for time and time again with clients is: have they established rituals that encourage or even force them to develop supportive habits? Are these behavioural patterns encouraged at work by word and deed? These are all exercises in cognitive training: we're teaching ourselves how to think so that we can outsmart our desires. **HRm**

*Dr Kevin Orrman-Rossiter is an executive coach, philosopher and futurist. He has a PhD in physics as well as management and marketing qualifications. He is a co-founder, along with Sharon Orrman-Rossiter, and director of bespoke coaching consultancy Clarity Now ([www.claritynow.com.au](http://www.claritynow.com.au)).*