



HOW TO GET MORE DONE

Procrastination: take our test now!

1. I find it hard to get organised and get started.
2. I'm easily distracted and my mind wanders a lot.
3. I leave things to the last minute and then rush to meet deadlines.
4. I usually have a lot of mess and clutter around me and I'm a bit disorganised.
5. I find it hard to make decisions and often dither.
6. I usually know exactly what I need to do on a task but can't make myself just do it.
7. I'm quite often late for appointments.
8. I find it difficult to work out how much time I will need to do something.
9. I tend to focus on the short term and find it hard to delay enjoyment now for a future benefit.
10. I'm a bit of a perfectionist. Sometimes I delay a task because I'm concerned the result won't be outstanding.

If more than half of these items apply to you, don't put off trying some of the ideas in this briefing!

The Hidden Cost of Gangnam Style!

Some time ago, 'The Economist' noted that the disturbingly addictive South Korean music video 'Gangnam Style' by PSY had gone well past two billion views on YouTube, making it the most watched clip of all time. It is just over 4 minutes long, so this equates to more than 140 million hours, or over 16,000 years of time spent watching PSY and his antics! This begs the question: what other achievements for the betterment of humanity have been delayed or even abandoned in all this time spent watching a group of enigmatic songsters engaging in air lassos and sideways shuffles?

The sharp brains at 'The Economist' calculated that, if those people had not been watching PSY (and they had all been willing to collaborate on a joint project!), they could have built 3 aircraft carriers, or 4 Great Pyramids of Giza, or 20 Empire State Buildings, or 4 Stonehenges, or 2 London Olympic Parks, or 1.5 Wikipedias! But such studies of productivity lost through frivolous distraction neglect the possibility that this amount of time was going to be wasted by this number of people anyway – it's just a matter of how they chose to waste it.

Do you sometimes find yourself wasting time?

When you think over the last few days at work, have you put off doing something that actually does matter to you? Do you find yourself getting focused only when the deadline gets tight? Is there a thrill in working against the clock – when, secretly, you know you could have planned your time so that there was no last minute crisis? Does your mind wander and you become distracted quite easily? If you're honest, do you sometimes avoid failure by never finishing (or perhaps never even starting) a key task – maybe that blockbuster business book or your breakthrough invention?

Procrastination is not a modern phenomenon. In fact, there are ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs complaining about procrastination and the first book on the topic, Anthony Walker's 'The Great Evil of Procrastination', was published in 1682. But this old problem has been fuelled by the digital era, with our constant stream of emails, memos, games, social media updates, internet wandering and 'cyber loafing'. If procrastination is an issue for you at least some of the time, then you are by no means alone. A large study conducted in Australia, UK and US confirmed what we have all surely suspected: 80-95% of university students suffer from chronic procrastination and, in the general workforce, the figure is a worrying 20%, with that number rising significantly when the researchers asked about occasional episodes which, nevertheless, had a negative impact on the person's productivity, self-esteem and overall happiness.

How might you set about procrastinating less?

Procrastination is about avoiding something that you feel in two minds about doing. So what is it about the task that makes you want to avoid doing it? Behavioural scientists at the London School of Economics have identified some common attention obstacles. For example, they found that you should do one thing at a time. Not only did people get more done that way, but they felt happier too. Multitasking reduces productivity because of the 'switching costs' as you move from one task to another.

A whole team can procrastinate!

Loan officers at a Columbian bank were found to have a *shared* habit of putting off finding new clients until just before their monthly bonuses were calculated. Unsurprisingly, more than 70% of them reported high stress levels and an inability to stick to work plans. But when they, as a team, broke down their work into defined weekly tasks and received small prizes for finishing each week, their procrastination levels went down dramatically and their enjoyment of the job went up.

The power of small behavioural 'nudges'

Some of the most innovative research on this common problem focuses on how to design 'nudges'. This is about creating a portfolio of small adjustments to your environment that work together to gently nudge you in a positive direction, in ways that feel natural and without effort. For example, put yourself back in the same setting where you wrote that last well-received report. The same context will nudge you towards those previous useful behaviours. However, if you always work in the same place and often struggle to get things done, rearrange your space completely and see what happens.

Other nudges include opting out of internet distractions; setting default deadlines; breaking something into small, public commitments; and hanging out with highly motivated people. This last impact was found to increase when people talk about how things are going. Conversing about experiences is pleasurable, so share with others how you get things done and listen to what they do.

Employees that reported they receive regular information about how well they are performing are more likely to say they experience high levels of meaningfulness at work. This matters because feeling a sense of purpose has been found to contribute to happiness. Even if you don't get immediate pleasure from that tough task, identifying for yourself exactly how it is meaningful, gives you a purpose-driven route out of procrastination. Finally, if you can forgive yourself for your past procrastination, it's more likely that you'll take some practical steps to break the pattern this time. So be kind to yourself, as you start to change old habits!