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A 9-Point Plan for Overcoming Procrastination

Why put off till tomorrow what you can do today? Four reasons why you avoid working on necessary tasks, and five ways to stop

Merge Gupta-Sunderji || September 8, 2015



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Admit it—you've been guilty of procrastination. Sometimes it was unintentional, because you had other priorities to deal with. Occasionally it was deliberate, because something else was more appealing. Either way, the outcome (or lack thereof) was less than desirable, and you likely vowed to yourself that you'd never do it again. Until of course you did.

What does it take to overcome this cycle of procrastination? The answer lies in understanding what causes it in the first place, and then taking steps to combat those causes directly. There are four reasons why you (and a whole lot of other people) put off getting things done.

THE TASK HAS LOW VALUE

In other words, it's something that you dislike. It's far more pleasant to design a new marketing initiative than to gather documents for the tax accountant. It's much more enjoyable to have coffee with a colleague than to file the last three weeks of expense statements. It's easy to put off things you don't like to do.

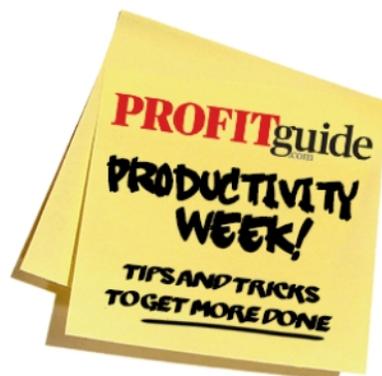
YOU HAVE A LOW EXPECTANCY OF SUCCESS

Usually based on your (or other's) past experiences. You might think:

"What's the point of making all these sales calls; I've been making cold calls for a week now and I've had zero success." Faced with that rejection, it's a lot more appealing to surf the Internet or organize your desk.

THE OUTCOME IS DELAYED

The result is too far into the future. Since the deadline for this sales proposal isn't for another month it's okay to leave



it for later. And of course, this decision to defer is relatively painless because of reason number four—you're easily side-tracked by bright shiny objects!

YOU'RE EASILY DISTRACTED

"Bright shiny objects" are tasks that effortlessly pull you away from your intended goal, such as an unexpected email that takes you away from the report you were writing or an unrelated web link that catches your attention and takes you miles away from the online research you're meant to be doing. Sure, bright shiny objects are sometimes urgent issues that need to be dealt with. But urgent or not, they demand immediate attention and thus distract you from your original objective.

Once you know the root causes of procrastination, what can you do to overcome it? Here are five specific suggestions.

THE FIVE-MINUTE TECHNIQUE

This is brilliant for things you don't like doing, or for routine tasks. Set a timer for five minutes and do nothing but the task. Once the timer goes off, you can either reset it for another five minutes, or just pat yourself on the back and move on to something else. This technique works because a short, fixed time spent tackling even the stuff you don't like is palatable. And you may find that it unexpectedly helps you build momentum to get things done once and for all.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!

So called because it involves giving yourself a gift. It can be hard to motivate yourself to do something if the reward is too far out in the distance. But if you can see a short-term reward, the task feels much more immediate, and it gets done. If you can't envision a prize on the immediate horizon, create your own—a walk down to the local coffee shop or 15 minutes of Angry Birds after you've finished a task, say.

THE SALAMI TECHNIQUE

Slice it up! This is particularly useful when a task seems too big or overwhelming, and so seems to lack direction. As a roll, salami may be unappetizing, but once you slice it up and pile the thin slices on to your sandwich, it suddenly becomes much more enticing. In the same way, if you take your task or your project and slice it into smaller and smaller pieces by function or time, you will find that it becomes easier to handle or more interesting to start with, and that you'll be able to visualize the end result more clearly.

PUBLICIZE YOUR TIME FRAME

Establish a deadline and tell others. Announcing to your colleagues that you'll have a first draft completed by Thursday means that your credibility is now at stake and you've just made yourself accountable for action. This works superbly if you have a tendency to get easily distracted.

JUST DO IT!

If all else fails, resort to the Nike advertising tagline. Sometimes the most difficult part of getting a job done is taking the first step. Get started—pick up the phone, outline a first draft, get in your car. Just do it!

Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a speaker, author and consultant whose leadership development practice focuses on turning managers into leaders and people power into results. Through large-audience keynotes, small-group training, one-on-one mentoring, and customized consulting, Merge has given over 65,000 professionals in eight countries specific and practical tools to help them achieve leadership and communications success.

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How do you overcome procrastination and boost your productivity? Share your tactics and tricks in the comments section below.

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