

Curbing the Procrastination Instinct

by Nicholas G. Carr



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research

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It often comes down to the way you set deadlines.

You assign a task to a team of subordinates, you establish a deadline a month in the future, and then you wait. A few days after the deadline, the team members sheepishly present you with the product of their work. It's clearly a rush job, full of errors and omissions. Annoyed, you wonder whether they viewed the deadline as the end date for the project, or as its start.


Procrastination is a fact of life, and in business it's a prime cause of inefficiency and shoddy quality. But is there anything you can do about it? Or is it so ingrained in human nature as to be beyond influence?

New research by two business professors indicates that the way you set deadlines has a profound effect on the degree to which workers procrastinate and even on the ultimate quality of their work. Dan Ariely, of MIT's Sloan School of Management in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Klaus Wertenbroch, of Insead in Fontainebleau, France, conducted a series of experiments in which they asked participants to perform tasks under different deadline scenarios. In one experiment, three groups of people were asked to complete a complex proofreading assignment. The first group was given a single deadline, three weeks out, for completing all the work. The second group was given a series of interim, weekly deadlines for completing portions of the job. Members of the third were told to set their own interim deadlines. Participants were paid according to the number of errors they corrected and were penalized for missed deadlines.

The results showed dramatic differences in both the timeliness and the quality of the work performed by the three groups. The worst performance on both counts was turned in by the group with a single, end-of-project deadline. Their work, on average, was 12 days late, and they corrected an average of only 70 errors. The best performance was delivered by the group

that was given a series of interim deadlines; their work was only 0.5 days late on average, and they caught 136 errors. The performance of the group that set its own interim deadlines fell in the middle: 6.5 days late, on average, with 104 errors caught. Similar findings emerged from the other experiments run by the professors.

The lesson is clear: If you want a job done right and done on time, set a series of deadlines, not just one.

A full report on this research can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/ariely/www/papers/deadlines.pdf>. 

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