

Procrastinate less & get more done

How to reduce the tendency to delay priorities

Harold L. Taylor



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Procrastinate less & get more done: How to reduce the tendency to delay priorities

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Introduction

The tendency to procrastinate is as natural as the urge to eat or sleep. But unlike food or rest, procrastination is seldom beneficial and never essential.

Although it is impossible to stop procrastinating completely, you can drastically reduce the tendency to procrastinate by a variety of strategies. The strategies you choose depend on the reason you are putting something off, the type of task you are working on, the environment in which you are working, and your personal mindset or attitude.

Regardless of the frequent calls to stop procrastinating, it is an unrealistic demand; especially since the usual definition of procrastination refers to delaying tasks that are best done now. There could be legitimate reasons for putting off such tasks. And the odd slip does not make you a chronic procrastinator.

Although studies reveal that 95% of people admit that they procrastinate, the definition of procrastination is far too severe.

In this book, I redefine procrastination, make the assumption that we all procrastinate to varying degrees, and offer some suggestions for reducing the number of incidents. By procrastinating less often, you will increase your effectiveness, feel better about yourself, and get more done.

In the last chapter I discuss ways of managing procrastinators on your team so that their bad habit does not negatively impact your own productivity, and conclude with a summary of suggestions for overcoming procrastinations.

1 What is procrastination and why do we put things off?

1.1 Procrastination defined

Procrastination affects all of us to one degree or another. It is one of the weaknesses of those experiencing ADHD symptoms, and particularly affects those of us with weak self-regulation, planning or impulse control. John Ratey, in his book *Spark: the revolutionary new science of exercise and the brain*, says that working memory is the backbone of all the executive functions, and a failure in working memory explains why people with ADHD are not good at keeping track of time, and as a result, are prone to procrastination. And weak task initiation skills are one of the major causes of poor time management and procrastination in particular.

Common definitions of procrastination include *putting off until later things that should be done today* or *putting off high priority activities by doing low priority activities instead*. But these are oversimplifications that make us look worse than we really are. We may not have much of a choice. Perhaps the boss *insists* that we finish the unimportant task first. Or maybe it's only a one-time delay. Or it could be that we simply forgot. Or something unforeseen cropped up that couldn't be ignored.

Don't be too hard on yourself. Procrastination is really *the intentional and habitual postponement of some important task that should be done now*. Any time you make a decision to do something at a specific time in the future, you are not procrastinating, you are planning. But if the postponement is *habitual*, i.e. you put it off until the next day, and then the next day, and then the next, and it's not merely a case of forgetting or being coerced into ignoring it, you're procrastinating.

Procrastination is such an insidious time waster. We sometimes convince ourselves that we don't have time to do it, or that it makes sense to polish off the small tasks first to get them out of the way, or that we're saving time in the event that the boss changes his or her mind, or that the urgency of the unimportant tasks is forcing us to do them first. There seems to be no limit to the excuses that people come up with for putting off something that should be done now.

It's still procrastination regardless of the excuses you make or the rationalizations you may have for putting it off, and something important usually suffers because of it.

We realize that the present is all we have – that tomorrow may be too late. We are also aware that putting off today's tasks simply adds to tomorrow's burdens. And none of us wants to be one of those people who spends their whole lives preparing to live and never getting around to enjoying each moment as it comes. And yet we procrastinate. Why?

1.2 Doing what comes naturally

Some things *have* to be delayed; others *should* be delayed. But if we continually and intentionally put off doing high priority activities by working on low priority activities instead, we are procrastinating. We straighten our desk, check Facebook or Twitter or review our spam folder instead of starting that position paper on gang violence in the schools. At home, we putter in the garden, smooth the kinks out of the garden hose instead of taking the kids to Wonderland. We surf the Internet, read blogs or watch a You Tube video, instead of getting started on that news release we have been meaning to write.

Priorities differ from person to person. A kinkless garden hose may be more important to someone than exercise or recreation or family time. But most of us know what our priorities are. They are the activities and tasks that help us to achieve personal and professional goals that bring fulfillment.

It's amazing how adept we are at thinking of other things to do when facing an unpleasant yet important task. You would think that we would be enthusiastic about an activity that would produce financial gain, relieve stress, and provide a sense of achievement. Unfortunately the satisfaction is not always immediate. The gain is not always something we can readily perceive. Few things worthwhile come without effort, inconvenience, or discomfort. Our natural tendency is to avoid unpleasantness. So we sacrifice long-term benefits in favor of those minor, short-term rewards. We are in effect giving up what we want most for what you want at the moment.

It's only natural to want to relax after dinner instead of loading the dishwasher, even though the delayed task might not be done as effectively once the food stains had hardened. And who could fault us for leaving the broken stair unrepaired until after the football game, even though it presents a safety hazard? And sleeping in on Sunday morning requires less effort than taking the family to church. There is always a diversion at hand to make shirking our responsibility to others and to ourselves more palatable.

1.3 The one-last-thing syndrome

It's generally important to arrive at work on time, and yet many people are frequently late due to what is sometimes referred to as the "one last thing" syndrome. They are ready to leave for work but they still have five or ten minutes to spare, so they do one last thing, such as make a phone call, unload the dishwasher or make out a "to Do" list, and end up leaving home late instead of early. If it's habitual, that's an example of procrastination; because they work on a less-important task than those tasks waiting for them at work. There's no penalty for arriving at work early. And according to the April, 2010 issue of *Psychology Today*, psychologists have found that chronic procrastinators are just as good at judging time as punctual people – so that eliminates the excuse of not realizing what time it was.

1.4 Fear of failure or success

Like the definition itself, the reason we procrastinate is not as clear-cut as it may seem. We're certainly not born that way. There is no such thing as a *procrastination gene*. Common reasons suggested in books include perfectionism, fear of success or fear of failure. And I can see how these things could impact us. If we're perfectionists, we could be delaying until we have time to do it to perfection. Unfortunately we will rarely have more time in the future than we have in the present. In fact, today is yesterday's future. Do you have more time today than yesterday? Delay can become chronic. If we fear either success or failure, then certainly not doing something will avoid both.

I used to wonder how anyone could possibly be afraid of being successful until someone in that situation shared his feelings with me. It was partly the fear of what it would mean in terms of lifestyle, relationships, personal integrity, and the pressure to maintain peak performance. I can understand that if our sense of self-worth is tied to our performance, we may feel we have to use our abilities to constantly perform at our peak. If we delay performing, that does not detract from our ability, and we can maintain our self-esteem. And by not performing, we can't fail.

To solve the above problems might require the help of a psychologist or therapist, or at least a skilled counselor – not a time management expert. My suggestion, however, would be not to equate your value with your performance. You are valuable as a person regardless of whether you succeed or fail. And to take the pressure off yourself, ask “What's the impact on my life or job if I don't do something perfectly? Or if I make a mistake? Or if I perform a certain task poorly?” Chances are the consequences would be minimal. It's not the end of the world. If we are procrastinating for these reasons we are playing mind games with ourselves and perhaps we do need professional help to sort things out.

But I believe that most of us procrastinate simply because we view a certain task or activity as being either unpleasant or overwhelming. And in these cases a time management approach would stand a good chance of succeeding.

1.5 The path of least resistance

If you frequently pass dozens of service stations that have no line-ups, yet don't stop for gas even if you're not in a hurry, simply because your gas tank is not quite empty, I'd call that procrastinating. Chances are, when your tank is on empty, you'll be rushing along a highway to meet a client – with not a service station in sight.

You can't tell me this involves a fear of failure or fear of success or perfectionism. It involves a resistance to performing even a mildly unpleasant task – in this case stopping and filling up your gas tank. Similarly we put off replying to email messages, conducting minor repairs around the house, making cold calls, making an appointment to see a doctor or dentist for the same reason. If we view the task as unpleasant, we'll avoid it as long as we can. We'll procrastinate. Our natural tendency is to take the path of least resistance.

I say *natural* because there's nothing abnormal about this behavior. We need not think less of ourselves simply because we procrastinate. Nor do we have to put ourselves on a guilt trip or be too self-critical. We're just being normal.

But just because we're doing what comes naturally doesn't mean we're doing what is best for ourselves. We can become more effective, more productive and more successful than the average person by developing the *do it now* habit. If you delay unpleasant tasks again and again, you eventually form the habit of procrastination. And habits are sometimes hard to break.

Although Maxwell Maltz, author of the book, *Psycho-Cybernetics*, has been credited with the suggestion that it takes 21 days to form a habit, what he said has been misinterpreted. The 21 days referred to how long it took patients to get used to a new face following plastic surgery. It probably applies to many things, such as getting used to a new job, home or lifestyle; but it has little to do with forming habits. On average, it actually takes 66 days to form a habit, and it can vary from a few weeks to several months.

2 Assessing your own tendency to procrastinate

2.1 Welcome to the club.

Procrastinators are plentiful. People in my time management seminars have constantly rated procrastination as one of their major time problems. Piers Steel, a *University of Calgary* psychologist, after analyzing psychological literature, concluded that 95 percent of people admit that they sometimes procrastinate. But because it's common doesn't mean it's right or acceptable. You want to leave footprints behind when you leave this earth – some evidence that you have been here, impacted lives, and taken advantage of whatever life had to offer. And according to one Internet statistic, procrastination has more than quadrupled in the last 30 years.

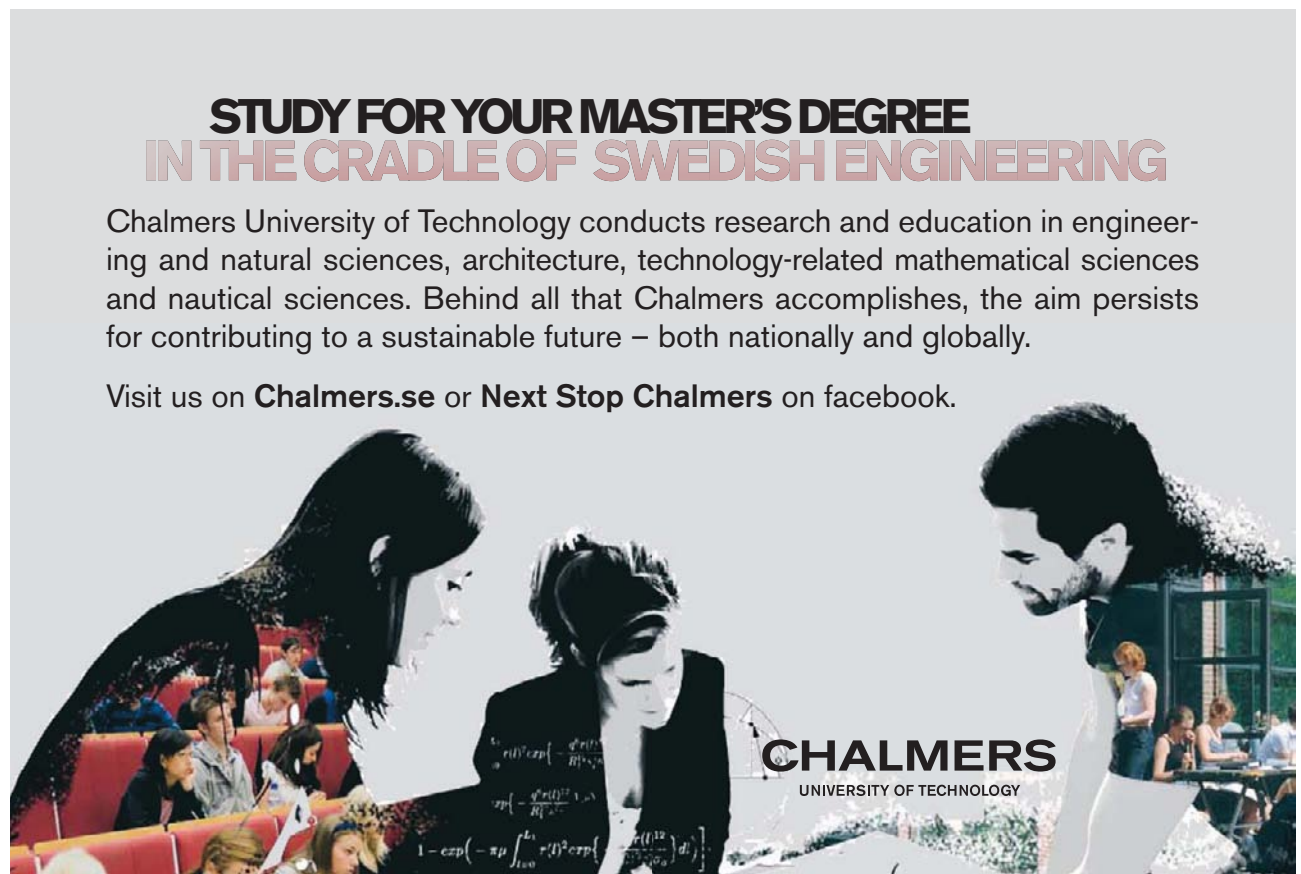
There is even a *Procrastinator's Club of America* that boasts 4000 members. And that doesn't count the half million members who haven't got around to paying their dues yet! Les Waas, elected president in 1956 still holds that office, since the association hasn't held their 1957 elections yet. Another article from a different publication explained the association's difficulty in selecting the *Procrastinator of the Year*. To quote, "The nominating committee never gets around to suggesting any names. They share the belief that if anything is really worth doing, it's worth putting off."

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$$\frac{L_1}{\sigma} r(t)^2 \exp\left[-\frac{q^2 r(t)^2}{R_1^2 \lambda^2}\right]$$
,
$$\exp\left[-\frac{q^2 r(t)^2}{R_1^2 \lambda^2}\right] \cdot \frac{1}{\sigma}$$
, and
$$1 - \exp\left(-\pi \mu \int_{t=0}^{L_1} r(t)^2 \exp\left[-\frac{q^2 r(t)^2}{R_1^2 \lambda^2}\right] dt\right)$$
. The Chalmers logo is at the bottom right of the collage.

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Although operating in a light vein, this Philadelphia-based Club actually exists. Back in the 1980s I wrote for information, and after a six week delay received a reply, which opened with “*Dear Fellow Procrastinator: Please forgive our sending the enclosed application for membership so few weeks after your request, but all of a sudden our work got all caught up and there was nothing else left for us to do.*”

Although many people make jokes about procrastination, it is more than an annoying habit. It can be detrimental to our success, happiness, and in some cases, our very lives.

2.2 Consequences of procrastination

Consequences can be either external, internal or both. External consequences include things such as penalties for overdue payments, interest charges on loans, reprimands by the boss or family members, or even the loss of a job. Internal consequences include frustration, anger at yourself, feeling pressured or guilty, becoming self-critical, or never knowing the joy of experiencing something you have dreamed of doing.

I’ve never seen figures on how much money is lost in this country through procrastination, but it must be in the billions. Check the line-ups at the post office on the last day for tax returns, or the final day for *anything* for that matter. Piers Steel, writing in the *Psychological Bulletin* mentions a study by H & R Block that shows that putting off doing their taxes costs U.S. citizens an average of \$400 each because of errors due to the last minute rush.

According to one author, an estimated 10 million people in the U.S. buy their Valentine’s Day gift or card on February 14th. How many people buy their Christmas cards a few months before Christmas? Why not? Is it too early? Do they self-destruct if kept more than ten days before mailing?

Sometimes procrastination has minor consequences. At other times, it results in death, injury, or unfulfilled lives. There is even the odd time that procrastination produces *favorable* results. But the habit of procrastination, regardless of the results, is self-defeating in the long run. It makes us feel guilty because we realize it’s wrong. It’s debilitating because we’re constantly dreading the task being postponed. We’re more tired mentally by *not* doing something than we would be physically if we were to actually *do* it. It consumes our energy, damages our reputation, and frequently negatively impacts other people’s productivity as well.

The activity we are postponing could be unpleasant in itself, such as weeding the garden – if that’s an activity that we deem unpleasant. Or its magnitude could be unpleasant. An activity such as writing a book could be overwhelming if we dwell on the length of time it would take. We tend to put off tasks that are either unpleasant for us, such as writing statistical reports, doing the laundry, or reprimanding a staff member – or those that will take an overwhelming length of time, such as saving \$5000 for a trip to Europe, finishing a rec room or writing a book.

You can usually spot a chronic procrastinator at work. They frequently have cluttered desks, an overflowing in-basket, stacks of unopened magazines, papers to be filed and a “To Do” list that gets longer every day. You may have to continually follow up to get anything from them. They frequently cancel appointments, reschedule meetings, and cancel out of seminars at the last minute. They’re usually flustered, disorganized and under constant pressure. And may also have a poor self-image.

2.3 Are you a chronic procrastinator?

Are you a chronic procrastinator or simply a casual delay artist? To determine how serious a procrastinator you really are, indicate whether the following statements are true, partly true, or false. In the spaces to the left of each statement enter 2 if true, 1 if partly true, and 0 if false.

- ___ I feel pressured about all the things I have yet to do.
- ___ I sometimes put off doing a task until it's either too late or I'm embarrassed to do it.
- ___ I like to stick with a task until it's perfect.
- ___ I frequently return to work with my “homework” from the previous day still in my computer bag untouched.
- ___ I frequently tell myself, “I’ll put it here for now and put it away later.”
- ___ I sometimes think that by delaying a task long enough it won't have to be done.
- ___ I intend to do things only to forget about them later.
- ___ I have at least two major projects at work or at home that I am leaving until I have more time.
- ___ I tend to leave things until the last minute, such as income tax returns, payment of speeding tickets, Christmas shopping, etc.
- ___ My email tends to accumulate in my inbox.
- ___ I have a stack of magazines waiting to be read or several books I haven't got around to reading yet.
- ___ I am frequently late or rushed when going to meetings, dinner engagements, church functions, etc.
- ___ I am usually one of the last ones on the block to take down my Christmas decorations, trim my trees, cut my grass, plant my garden, close up the cottage.
- ___ There are times when I am unable to book a lodge, flight, theatre or other event because I left it until too late.
- ___ I have several broken items at home waiting to be repaired or articles of clothing waiting to be mended.
- ___ Total Points

Add the number of points in the spaces to the left of the statements. If you have more than 15 points, you are prone to procrastination. If you have more than 20 points you probably delayed taking this test. If you have 30 points, it's amazing that you ever got around to starting to read this book, let alone taking the test! But now that you have *started* reading, don't stop. You're on a roll. By the time you finish this book, you will want to dig right into all those projects that you haven't got around to starting yet.

3 Immediate actions that will reduce procrastination

3.1 Developing the “do it now” habit

To change a bad habit we must first admit that we have one. Then, to replace it with a good habit, we must act out the new behavior we’re trying to acquire – again and again – until it becomes effortless to do so. Chances are there are several jobs or types of jobs that we tend to put off. Once we have identified them, we must concentrate on doing them one at a time.

We can’t stop procrastinating on everything at once; but we *can* focus our energies on one thing at a time. For example, if you tend to put off filing, make up your mind now that you will spend ten minutes at the end of each day dragging documents into appropriate folders. Initially you will have to muster all the willpower you have to make yourself do that job. But after you have forced yourself to do it for about 60 days or more, it will not require the same degree of energy. It will become a habit. And success breeds success. You will find you tackle the next distasteful task with a little more enthusiasm.

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This may seem like a long process if you procrastinate on a lot of jobs. And it is. But I don't believe you can eliminate procrastination itself. Procrastination is always linked with a task, activity or goal. We can only eliminate procrastination as it relates to those tasks that we are always delaying. It took a long time for us to develop bad habits, so it makes sense that it would take a long time to replace them with good habits. But the more you succeed, the easier it gets. What you eventually develop is self-discipline. And self-discipline is an important key to successful time management. It is also one of the brain-based skills that gets stronger the more you practice it.

3.2 If it's distasteful, get rid of it

We tend to postpone jobs that are unpleasant. If we have to deny a request, cancel an order or work on a boring statistical report, we drag our feet. And why not? It's distasteful. So we spend our energy on anxiety rather than on action. We dread the time when we can postpone it no longer and finally *have* to act. But act we must, and when we finally do – what a relief! A load has been lifted from us. And only then do we discover that it wasn't such a big deal after all.

Why suffer by dragging out the inevitable? Develop the *do it now* habit. Don't tell yourself, "It's unpleasant, so I'll delay action." Say instead, "It's unpleasant, so I'll do it now and get it over with." Your effectiveness will increase because an unpleasant task isn't hanging over your head. You won't be under stress. And your prompt action may prevent further complications or embarrassment, squelch rumors, and improve relationships. Replace the procrastination habit with the *do it now* habit.

There are ways to make the process easier. Some people believe that if they make a public announcement or tell a friend about their commitment to stop procrastinating on a certain task, the incentive to persist is increased. Others believe the promise of a reward for succeeding helps. Performing the distasteful task during your prime time – that part of the day when you are more mentally alert and energetic – tends to make it easier. For most people this is first thing in the morning. A related idea is to leave the project or a reminder of it on your desk before going home at night, the thought being it will be the first thing that you spot in the morning. Or schedule it in your planner at a specific time. The important thing to remember is not to try to wipe out procrastination all at once.

There's only one cure for procrastination, and you're it! You must decide right now to take control of your own life. Set goals, determine your priorities, schedule your activities, and develop the *do it now* habit. It has been said that if you have to swallow a frog, it doesn't pay to look at it too long! Long, seemingly overwhelming tasks can be worked at a little at a time until it's eventually finished. The secret is to *start*. And start *now*!

3.3 Overcoming the overwhelming

The other major reason we procrastinate on a job or a long-term goal is that we view it as an overwhelming task. We feel it's going to take a long time, and we don't have time right now, so we leave it until later. But we never seem to have the time later either. So we add it to a "To do" list. Unfortunately a "To do" list does nothing to further the progress of a task. In fact, it becomes a procrastination tool in itself. There's no commitment with a "To do" list.

It's difficult to complete a task when there's no end in sight. Swimmer Florence Chadwick was said to have failed in her swim from Catalina Island because she couldn't see the shore. How many tasks have you started but never finished because they were overwhelming? You couldn't see the end. They seemed to go on forever. You became discouraged and eventually quit, telling yourself that you would work on it later.

Most of the jobs that produce the greatest value take longer periods of time. So they are the ones that encourage procrastination. In order to ensure their completion, we should break the jobs into chunks, providing interim finish times so the ends are always in sight and we maintain our motivation to complete each segment. If we have to call 100 clients, for instance, interim goals might be to contact ten clients each day for ten days. The achievable and more palatable goal of ten replaces the overwhelming target of 100.

Don't take on too much at a time. Instead of cleaning out a filing cabinet, tackle one drawer or one file at a time. Instead of writing a book, set a goal of one chapter a week. Instead of trying to save over \$1200 in a year, save \$100 each month. The deadline for the entire project remains the same, but no segment of it is overwhelming.

3.4 Deadlines make a difference

It seems like our brain has a mind of its own. According to Esther Landhuis, writing in the January/February, 2015 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, you can trick your brain into meeting any due date by thinking differently about deadlines. When we think of a deadline as something occurring in the present, we are more likely to begin the task.

For example, something due this week would be perceived by the brain as something more urgent than something due this month; something due this month would be perceived as being more urgent than something due next month, and so on – *even though the actual number of days to the deadline are identical.*

So a project due date of March 31st set on March 21st would prompt action faster than a due date of April 1st set on March 20th even though you had the same number of days to complete the task.

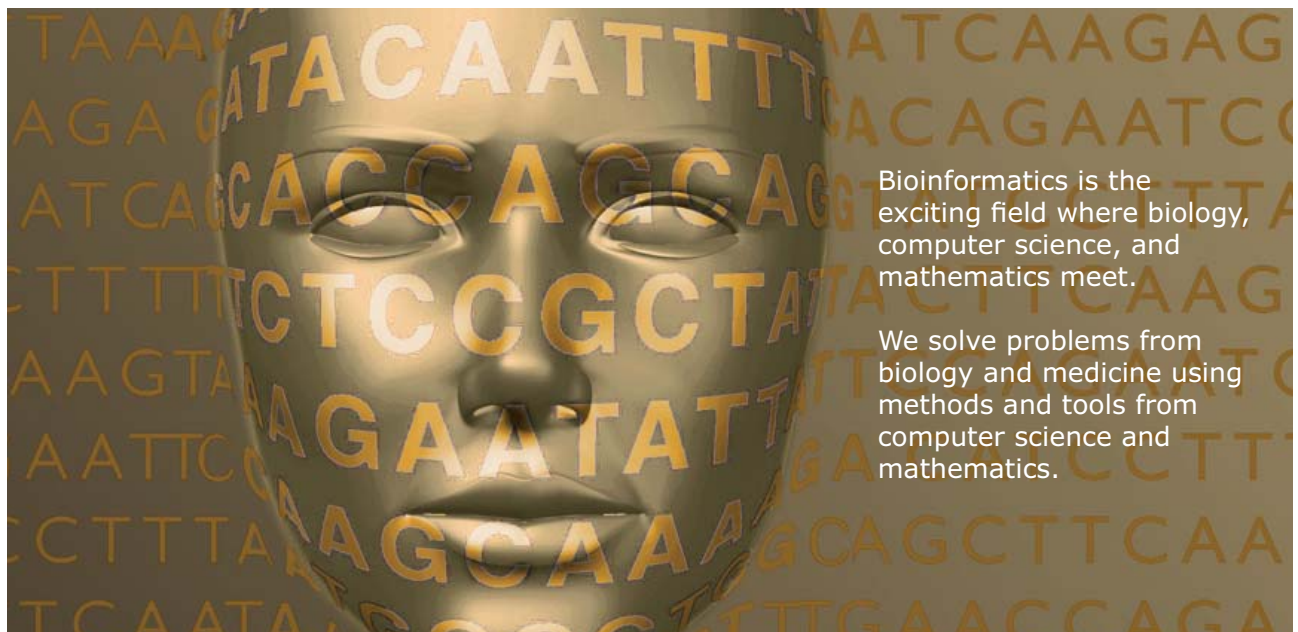
Research confirms this. One experiment, published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, involved asking 100 students when they would start a data-entry task if they had 5 days to complete it. The ones who were assigned the task late enough in April so the deadline fell in early May were less likely to start the task right away compared to those whose deadline fell in the same month – even though they had the same number of days to work on the task.

Since the brain seems to divide time into segments, we could use this fact by issuing assignments early enough so the deadlines fall in the same week, month or year. This might necessitate breaking the longer tasks or projects into shorter sub-tasks with shorter deadlines.

It might also suggest that making New Year's resolutions might be best moved to the middle of the year rather than the end of the year so that the deadlines fall in the same year. After all, leaving a resolution until next year when you thought of it this year could be construed as procrastination.



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4 Time management strategies to keep you on track

4.1 Don't let procrastination be a barrier to goal-setting

Procrastination is the biggest barrier to goal-setting; but you can overcome it with a little self-discipline. With the average Canadian spending over 45 hours online each month, there's not much time left to focus on goals. And goals are seldom urgent so they take a back seat to our firefighting duties. In addition, research suggests that Internet use is having a negative impact on how we think and behave, affecting our ability to focus, store memory, and interact with others.

Yet goals add significance to your life, and along with it, a sense of pride and accomplishment, a boost in your self-esteem, and a sense of purpose and fulfillment that impacts your health and well-being.

Don't use busyness as an excuse to delay your goal-setting. Busyness looks more like real work than real work does – because of the flurry of activity normally associated with it. But don't let the many things of minor importance crowd out those few things of major significance. You – and the world – can survive without them. If not, you had better work on living forever.

Self-discipline is the rejection of instant gratification in favor of something better – a higher and more rewarding goal. Once you have written down your goals and blocked off times in your planner to work on them, you have a reason to resist the temptation to go wherever your impulses take you. The more you resist temptation, the easier it becomes, and the less you will procrastinate.

Task initiation is one of the brain-based executive skills that allow you to begin tasks without undo procrastination. Some people have strong skills; but many of us seem to be weak in this area. Our brains are malleable though, and we can strengthen these skills through continued effort.

Walter Mischel, in his book, *The Marshmallow Test* (2014), suggests there is a limit to how much self-control we can exert before fatigue take over, so don't overwhelm yourself with too many goals. It took about 20 years for your executive skills to develop so it will take more than a few weeks to strengthen them.

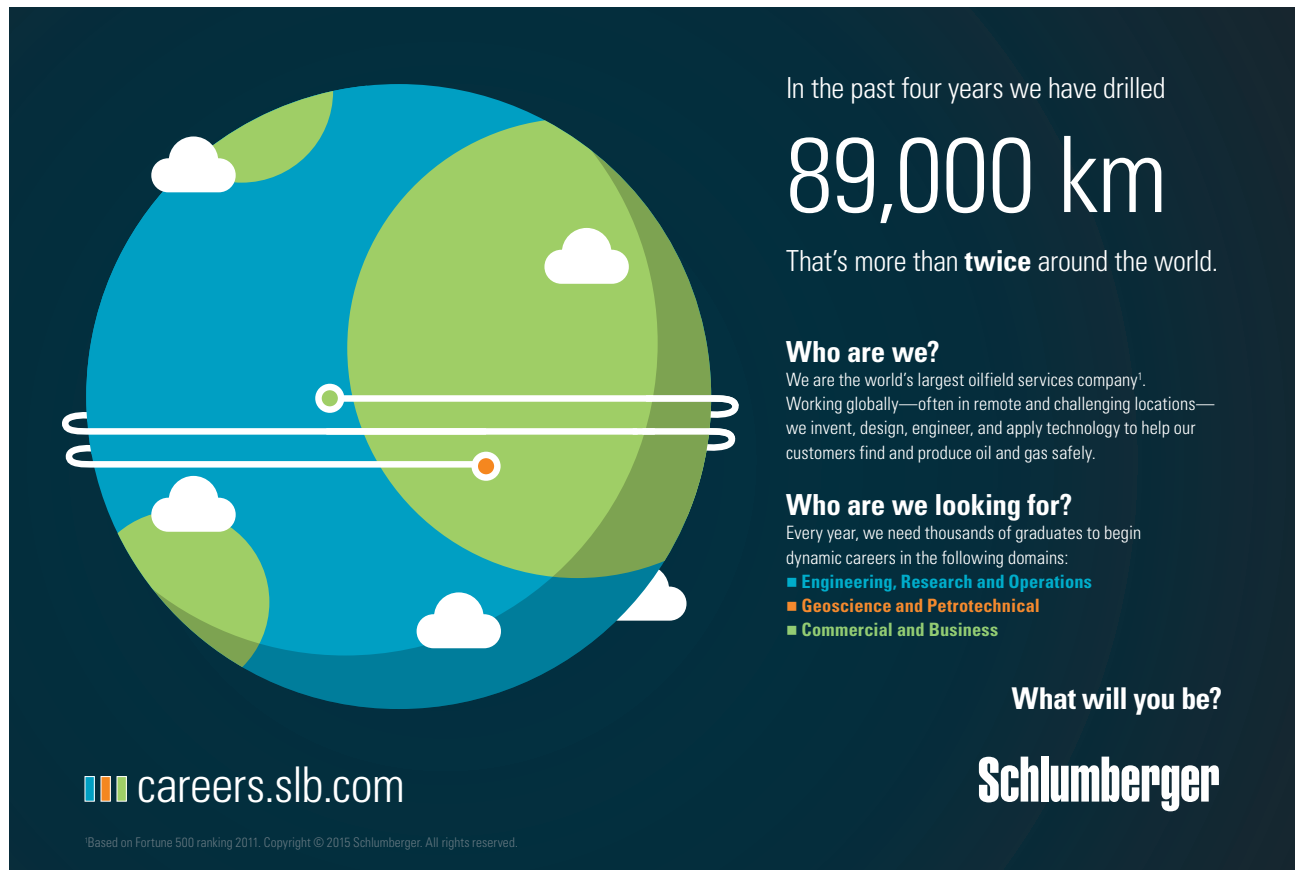
Avoid goals that don't excite you or you will be more vulnerable to digital distractions and unmindfulness. Telling other people about your specific goals and making commitments rather than just voicing intentions have been known to help as well.

Make it even easier by not trying to accomplish everything on your own. *Weight Watchers* claims that people who use a support group are three times more likely to lose weight than folks on their own. Have someone hold you accountable when you set goals. The “buddy system” can be applied to job and lifestyle changes as well.

The most important thing is to build the habit of spending a certain amount of time each day or week working on a specific goal-related task. You can then apply this habit to any goal, no matter how large, whether it is writing a book one chapter at a time, completing a self-study course one lesson at a time or becoming a super salesperson one sale at a time.

4.2 Use the chunk method

Most of us tend to procrastinate if the job is a big one. We kid ourselves into thinking we’ll have a larger block of time available at a later date. But we never do. The trick is to start the task regardless of whether we have five minutes or five hours. At least we can bring the task five minutes closer to completion. There’s no such thing as an insurmountable task, only long links of small tasks that collectively seem insurmountable.



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For example, we never wallpaper a whole room. We paper one strip at a time, one wall at a time, until the whole room is papered. Similarly, we don't write a book. That's an overwhelming task. We simply write a series of paragraphs, which link together to form a chapter, which in turn link with other chapters to form a book. We must approach large tasks this way or we will never get the courage to tackle them at all. We'll procrastinate.

If you want to move three hundred files from your filing cabinet to the office down the hall, simply grab a dozen or so every time you head in that direction. Within a few weeks you will have moved them all. If you have to create a manual of lengthy procedures, simply spend ten minutes each day writing one step of one procedure at a time. If you have to clean out a closet at home, tackle only ten hangers or one carton each night.

If you want to accomplish any goal, whether it is to write a book or take a degree course or simply complete a business project, you must work at it in small chunks – a bit at a time – until it's complete. No task is too large or too overwhelming if you work at it a little at a time. Who can't save a dollar or two each week? Imagine making one extra cold call each day, or developing one new product each month or taking one degree course each decade. *Successful people do a little at a time, again and again.*

So don't think about the project in its entirety, and become discouraged. Think about the small chunk, the short-term goal, and the little tasks that collectively become the major project.

Michel Lotito of Grenoble, France had a goal to eat a bicycle. But he didn't toss it onto the kitchen table and eat it all at once. He melted it broke it down into tiny portions and consumed it bit by bit over a period of time. Eating a bicycle might be viewed as a questionable achievement; but the point is that almost anything can be accomplished if we work on it a little at a time. However, we must have the *motivation* to keep at it. No doubt Mr. Lotito had to face some very unpleasant lunches in order to accomplish his feat. And he probably would not have gotten past the handlebars if he had not reminded himself of his goal to get into the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

4.3 The "To Do" list fallacy

If you start work with a list of ten items to do and end the day with a list of fifteen, including the original ten, you may be a victim of the "To do" list fallacy. A list of things to do serves as a reminder of all the things not yet done, but provides no commitment to actually do them. In fact, it encourages procrastination since it includes all those other more pleasant, easier tasks that could tempt you away from those that *should* be done now.

Instead of keeping everything together on one list, separate the important, high-payback activities from the items of lesser importance and schedule these “must do” items directly into your planning calendar along with your meetings and appointments. For example, the development of a needed policy manual should never remain on a “To do” list. Block out the time needed in your planner, let’s say between 2:30 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. and treat it as though it were a meeting with the boss. Close your door and have calls intercepted if that’s what you would do if it were a meeting with someone else. But allow a little extra time for those unavoidable interruptions that are bound to occur. If you schedule several of these meetings with yourself during the week, you will accomplish those priority jobs, decrease the tendency to procrastinate, and increase your effectiveness.

4.4 Make commitments, not lists

“To do” lists are fine for grocery shopping and those odd tasks that you would like to get done; but if you’re a results-oriented person, scheduled commitments are a must. Don’t be discouraged if some of your scheduled activities have to be changed. A schedule must be flexible; but resist changing your schedule simply to accommodate tasks of no greater importance than your originally planned activity. If a salesperson shows up unexpectedly, for instance, don’t abandon your priorities in favor of an impromptu meeting. Block off periods of time in your planning calendar with the intent of following through with them. Don’t stop scheduling even if your plans have to be frequently altered. Doctors don’t stop scheduling office appointments simply because they are frequently called out on emergencies.

The first thing you schedule into your planner should be blocks of time to work on your goal-related activities. This will ensure that you are working on the 20 percent of the activities that will produce 80 percent of your results, thus avoiding the opportunity to procrastinate.

The *Taylor Planner*, available at Taylorintime.com has a single page near the front of the planner for the current year’s goals. List here those priority projects which you want to accomplish during the year. If you are using a different planner, you might consider inserting a similar page. Don’t include the routine jobs or those obligations that do little to further your company’s or your personal goals.

Include the important things that you have been putting off year after year simply because you haven’t had the time to work on them. These goals could be personal as well as professional and might include such things as writing a book, redecorating a home, or planning a trip to Europe.

In order to determine the target date (recorded in the column to the right of the goal), estimate how many hours it would take to complete the task. In some cases, this may be impossible to determine accurately. If so, simply guess; then add up to 50% additional time to be on the safe side. For example, if you feel it could take 100 hours of solid writing to finish a book, make it 150 hours. Then divide this figure by the number of weeks you plan to work that year.

For example, if you work 50 weeks, then the number of hours each week that you will have to work on your goal-related activity would be three. Since it is difficult to work steadily for three hours on any one activity, break this into two sessions of one-and-a-half hours each. To accomplish your goal of writing a book, you would then have to spend one and-a-half hours twice per week in order to complete it by the end of the year. If this amount of time is unrealistic, set the goal for the end of the following year and work half as long each week. Don't be impatient; be realistic.



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5 The role of organization and time management in preventing procrastination

5.1 We all have weaknesses to varying degrees

Task initiation, one of the brain-based skills mentioned earlier in this book, is the ability to begin tasks without undo procrastination. If you have no problem digging right into a task at the scheduled time, seldom put things off, and have no trouble getting started with priorities at the beginning of each work day, you have strong task initiation skills. But if you tend to procrastinate, are slow getting started, do a lot of preliminary stuff like read the paper, have a coffee, straighten your desk etc. then you are weak on task initiation.

Telling other people about your goals and making commitments rather than simply intentions have been known to help. Also recording starting times – including blocks of time in which to do your priority tasks – is a good idea. Having all materials ready before you start so there's no excuse to interrupt yourself and doing unpleasant tasks first are good ways to partially compensate for weak initiation skills. Forming a habit of starting for early in the morning, having policies as to when you work on the various tasks and choosing a quiet location all might help.

5.2 The pleasure principle

We tend to avoid unpleasant things and gravitate towards pleasant things. This tendency is so common that it has even been given a label, the *Pleasure Principle*, which has been defined as: “*an organism avoids pain and seeks immediate gratification.*”

In a way, the *marshmallow experiment* is an example of this principle. It was originally conducted at Stanford University back in the sixties. A group of four-year olds were given a marshmallow and promised another if they could wait twenty minutes before eating the first one. Some children could wait and others could not. The researchers then followed the progress of each child into adolescence, and demonstrated that those with the ability to wait were better adjusted and more dependable and scored an average of 210 points higher on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Those who gave into temptation early on were more likely to be lonely, easily frustrated and stubborn. They didn't cope well with stress and stayed clear of challenges. Yale University later conducted research on adults and found the similar results.

The executive skills needed in order to wait for a greater reward include task initiation and response inhibition. It may explain why we tend to procrastinate on distasteful or overwhelming tasks and work instead on those brief and pleasant tasks, even though they may be less important. As I mentioned previously, we are frequently putting off what we want most in order to get what we want at the moment.

5.3 Compensating for weak “task initiation” skills

How were the few four-year-olds, who also had very weak executive skills (since these skills take almost twenty years to fully develop) able to resist temptation and wait for the second marshmallow? Well, in examining the tapes many years later, researchers noticed that those children used strategies that allowed them to resist temptation – strategies that we could use ourselves in order to manage ourselves more effectively.

They all changed their environment in some way so as to offset their natural inclination to devour the marshmallow right away. Some put the marshmallow out of their line of sight by sitting under the table or by facing away from the marshmallow. Others sang a song or hummed a tune, focusing their attention on something other than the marshmallow. They did something to avoid having to face the temptation.

Translating these strategies to the business environment, you could turn off your cellphone, engage voicemail, turn off email alerts and close your office door at specific times while you work on your priority projects. You could remove all clutter and other potential distractions from your immediate work area – including any in-baskets.

Don't have family photos or memorabilia in your line of sight. Face a blank wall, not a window or open doorway. Work on projects for 60 or 90 minutes at a time – maximum. If you find that's too long to postpone urges to interrupt yourself, shorten the work sessions even more. You can always increase them gradually later. Between sessions you can check email, return phone calls and grab a coffee. Work in short sprints rather than attempt marathons. Research shows that willpower consumes a lot of energy so you must pace yourself.

Through environmental and procedural changes it will be easier to resist the temptation to put things off. And the more you practice self-discipline, the stronger the neural connections in the brain, and the stronger those task initiation skills will become.

5.4 Get organized

Although reluctance to start unpleasant or time-consuming tasks are major causes of procrastination, disorganization makes it worse.

Organizing your office and home not only helps you to find things, it helps you to find purpose in life as well. According to recent research reported in the July/August, 2015 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, an ordered life lays the groundwork for the pursuit of larger goals, purpose, and significance.

Getting organized, maintaining a tidy office, keeping a daily schedule, having weekly dinners with friends and other routines all add meaning to your life, according to Samantha Heintzelman, a University of Missouri psychologist. Although most people may think routines bring boredom, they bring richness to the mundane, while saving time and mental energy to invest in higher pursuits.

Few people balk at the morning routine of taking a shower, getting dressed, brushing their teeth and so on before starting their day. It's necessary groundwork upon which to launch their significant activities. Neither should they question the validity of planning their day, dispensing with email, making their calls, and working on their significant projects in chunks of time throughout the day.

For maximum ongoing productivity and achievement you should first invest the time in organizing your office or work area. Set up your electronic and hard copy file systems, your follow-up system, the location of your inventory and office supplies, the layout of your desk and bookshelves, and so on.

Then choose a good planner that displays all seven days at a glance, segmented into 15-minute or half hour increments from early morning until late evening so you can schedule both work and personal activities. Develop the habit of scheduling time for the priorities of the day well before the day's activities begin.



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Relegate the less important tasks to your “To Do” list, preferably on the same week-at-a glance planner page.

You must manage your energy as well as your time. Routines require less energy, leaving plenty for creativity, decision-making, and the mental demands of your significant projects and tasks.

And the tendency to procrastinate is reduced to a minimum.

5.5 Manage your time

People who are disorganized usually lack clear-cut goals, rarely plan or schedule adequately, have misplaced priorities and manage themselves poorly with respect to time. The procrastination parasite thrives on these individuals. They are so busy hopping from one job to another and dealing with constant interruptions that they postpone everything that isn't yet a crisis.

If you are a victim of disorganization, act now. Have written goals. Plan your months, days and hours. Give priority to those tasks that will lead you closer to your goals. Make appointments with yourself to start each project at a particular time. And keep those appointments. Schedule those long or distasteful activities early in the day. Then get a head start by starting early. A fast and productive start sets the stage for a productive day. Practice self-discipline. Make up your mind that you are going to adopt a *do it now* attitude. For help in getting organized, refer to my book, *Productive time management*. (Bookboon, 2013). Meanwhile, here are ten suggestions for getting organized and gaining control of your time.

Put your goals in writing. Time is life. Don't leave it to chance. Determine where you would like to be in ten years or five years and put those goals in writing. Then schedule time for yourself to work in that direction. Where you will be in ten years or five years is determined by what you are doing today, tomorrow and next week. If you don't have goals, you won't realize the full impact of procrastination.

Organize your work area. An organized desk is not the sign of a sick mind, it is the sign of an organized mind. People do better on exams when neatly dressed, excel in sales when well-prepared, and are more productive at work when their materials are arranged in an orderly way. Keep your in-basket off your desk to minimize interruptions and distractions. If possible, have your desk face the wall. Disorganization breeds procrastination.

Plan your day. If you have no objectives for the day you will likely have a matching set of results. Plans are the handrails that guide you through the day's distractions and keep you on course. Plan what you will do at the start, evaluate progress during the day, and measure results at the finish. Planning is the enemy of procrastination.

Schedule your tasks. Listing jobs on a “to do” list shows your intention to work on them; but scheduling important tasks in your planner reveals a commitment to get them done. Make appointments with yourself at specific times to work on your priority tasks. And try to keep those appointments. If you can continually commit yourself to work on planned tasks at predetermined times, you will defeat the tendency to procrastinate.

Handle only once. When possible, that is. Don’t even look at your email, for example, until you have 30 to 60 minutes available to review and take action on it. As you open each email, either delete it, answer it, forward it, file it, or schedule a time to handle its contents later. It’s impossible to “do it now” and procrastinate at the same time.

Write it down. Writing things down does not mean you are circumventing your memory – you are simply helping it to do its job. We all need reminders to prevent a myriad of essential tasks from being delayed simply because they conveniently keep slipping our mind. The pen is mightier than the sword – and it writes better.

Say no more often. Some people say, *yes* to others simply because they’re available or don’t want to offend. Make sure the request is compatible with your goals before you agree. Have as much respect for your own time as you have for other peoples’ time. Remember, every time you say *yes* to something, you are saying *no* to something else that could be more important. This is worse than procrastination because you will never have time to do the things that should be done.

Delegate more. This is the greatest time-saver of all; because it frees up time for more important tasks. If you have no one to delegate to, ask your suppliers to help. Don’t delegate anything that can be eliminated. And don’t delegate to procrastinators without having a fool-proof follow-up system.

Practice Pareto’s Principle. This 80–20 rule suggests that 80% of your results are achieved by 20% of the things you do. Focus on the priorities, and if anything gets put off or doesn’t get done, at least let it be the less important tasks.

Don’t procrastinate. Procrastination is the nemesis of organization. Putting things off wastes time, causes stress and helps make life unpleasant for yourself and others. By practicing the nine suggestions above as well as the recommendations in this book, you will be able to gain control of your time and your life.

5.6 Fight procrastination with routines

As mentioned earlier, many of the tasks we tend to put off are those that we simply don't like to do, whether it's returning phone calls, answering complaints making cold calls to prospects or writing that weekly report. One way of fighting this tendency is to schedule these tasks at the same time each day or week. Tasks performed again and again at the same time each day become a habit, like brushing your teeth or taking a shower. Few of us even think about whether routine activities like brushing our teeth are enjoyable or not. We simply *do* them. They are a necessary part of living, and take little time or effort.

For example, you could return telephone calls every day at 11 a.m. and 4 p.m., spend one hour each morning from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. making cold calls or write emails first thing after lunch each day.

Allowing tasks to accumulate makes it easier to procrastinate. It's a lot more difficult to return ten calls than it is to return five of them. And it's a lot more time-consuming to write twenty emails than it is to respond to five of them. Procrastination breeds procrastination. Don't allow jobs to get ahead of you. Do them on a regular basis so they become a daily routine as opposed to a weekly adventure.

Be careful that these routines don't become ruts. Eventually someone will find a better way of doing almost everything. So periodically question what you are doing, why you are still doing it and how you are doing it. A routine is not something you do without thinking; it is something you do without procrastinating.

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5.7 Motivation can conquer procrastination

We would more readily work on distasteful tasks if we were motivated to do so. If we visualized a task as a stepping-stone to a goal we greatly desired, motivation would increase. For example, few people enjoy jumping out of bed at 5 a.m. to face a routine day. But if getting up at 5 a.m. ensures that they connect with the 7 a.m. departure of a plane headed for Hawaii, the chore of rising early is seen in an entirely different light. Similarly, a boring subject at school is not as distasteful when viewed as a stepping-stone to graduation. Exercise is more palatable when viewed as a way of remaining healthy. And making cold calls doesn't seem as arduous when it's done to win a sales award, exceed our quota, earn a promotion or achieve some other desirable goal.

The point here is that we should set goals for ourselves and view each task, pleasant or otherwise, as stepping stones in the achievement of these goals. Our thoughts should not dwell on the unpleasantness or difficulty of the task, but focus on the joy of achieving the goal.

If unpleasant tasks do not help to achieve a personal or organizational goal, perhaps they *should* be delayed, or avoided altogether. Only the important tasks merit our attention. And the important tasks are those that will help us achieve our goals.

Procrastination is a case of mind over matter. If the job doesn't matter to us, we let it slip from our mind. Make it matter by constantly reviewing the benefits of achieving the overall goal. Motivation helps us to overcome the tendency to procrastinate.

To overcome the habit of procrastination, we must generate some enthusiasm to offset the unpleasantness. We must concentrate, not on the activity, but on the reward awaiting us upon completion.

Motivation is the product of our desire to achieve a goal and the expectancy that what we are about to do will be successful in achieving that goal. Even though we may want something badly, if we don't feel we have a chance of achieving it, our motivation will be low. Keep your motivation high by raising your expectation of achieving each goal.

Author Ari Kiev once wrote, "*When you postpone your involvement in something, you will probably never accomplish it, and you will be left with memories of past wishes rather than past deeds.*" Yesterday will never come again, and tomorrow may never arrive; but today is ours. Let's make the most of it.

6 Eliminating barriers to the “do it now” habit.

6.1 Perfectionism is procrastination’s ally

A perfectionist is one who spends an inappropriate amount of time on a task. A perfectionist believes that *if a job is worth doing at all it is worth doing well*. Unfortunately the word *well* to a perfectionist means *perfect*. The result in many cases is that more time and effort is expended than the end result justifies. In other cases the job isn’t even completed on time, if completed at all.

Some goals are never achieved simply because the individual waited for enough time to do a “good” job. Time is at a premium for everyone and “enough time” for a perfectionist is rarely available. Therefore perfectionism and procrastination frequently go hand in hand.

Recognize that every task has a point of diminishing return. Make up your mind in advance that you will only devote a certain amount of time to the job. For example, don’t wash your car until it is so clean it squeaks; wash it as well as you can in the half hour you have allocated to that job. Let the time spent be in proportion to the importance of the task.

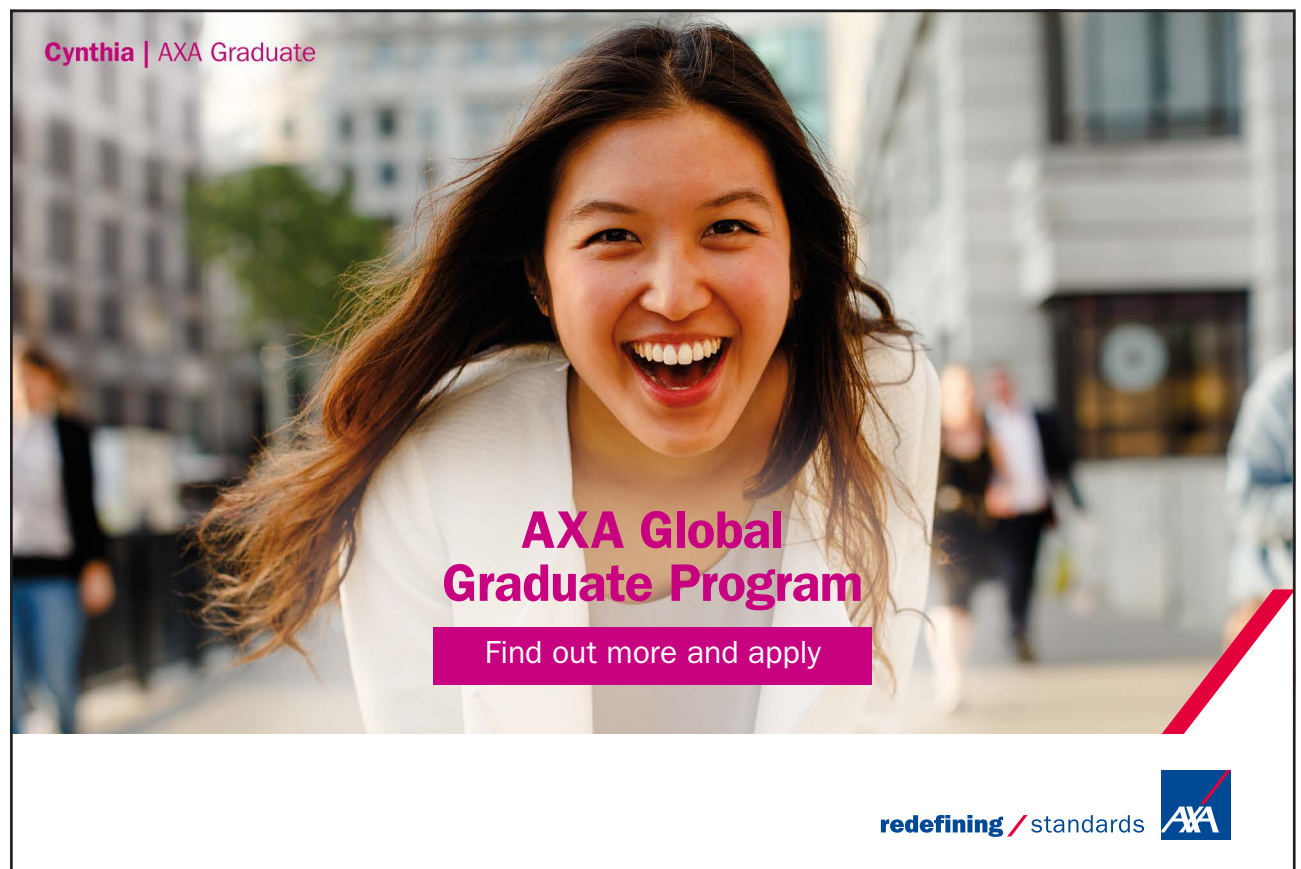
You cannot always conclude that a person is a perfectionist simply because he or she is spending a lot of time on a project and getting everything letter perfect. It depends on the value of the results. A professional speaker might be perceived as a perfectionist for arriving two hours early, testing the microphone, laying out all the materials, adjusting the overhead, screen, chairs, and perhaps even rehearsing the opening comments. But if the person’s objective is to do a great job, earn credibility, win more contracts, and increase the bottom line, the results justify the extra time spent.

Similarly, a real estate agent who researches the community he or she is farming, checks out recent sales, summarizes listings in the area comparable to the prospect’s home, plans a presentation in detail, and spends hours reviewing details before making the contact, could be viewed as a perfectionist. But if the result is to get a listing and a fat commission check, the extra effort is warranted.

What usually differentiates a perfectionist from a planner is the value of the task being worked on. Usually about 20 percent of our activities produce 80 percent of our results. Identifying those 20 percent, and spending twice as much time on them as our competitors are spending, is not being a perfectionist: it’s being smart.

But there are so many interesting and enjoyable activities among those 80 percent that only produce 20 percent of our results that we are frequently tempted to fall prey to perfectionism. The longer we spend on those unimportant, pleasant activities, the longer we can delay working on those meaningful goals we have set for ourselves. Having a neat, tidy desk with books in alphabetical order, and a color-coded planner are sure pleasing to the eye. And they actually save time while you’re working at your desk. But if 80 percent of your value is from personal contact with clients in the field, the hours being spent re-organizing books and files could legitimately be called both perfectionism and procrastination. Learn to operate with your objectives in mind. Spend the majority of your time on the key priorities that relate to those objectives. And if, in the process, the picture on the wall remains at half-mast and your desk is not dusted, so be it.

We should budget our time, spending more time on the goal-related priorities and less on the small stuff. If it’s true that eighty percent of our results are from twenty percent of the things we do, it follows that if we were to concentrate the bulk of our time and effort on the twenty percent and do a mediocre job on the eighty percent, the results would be phenomenal. This does not mean we should do sloppy work eighty percent of the time. We should do the best we can in the time that we have allocated to that eighty percent. But any additional improvement we would get by attempting to do it perfectly would not justify the extra expenditure of time.



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Perfectionists should ask themselves, “What would be the impact on the company or family or career if this project were submitted as it is?” If the answer is “Nothing,” it would probably be counterproductive to spend more time refining it. Let the amount of time allocated be proportional to the value of the project. Spend time based on objectives, not feelings.

Whether perfectionism has stemmed from unrealistic expectations of parents or teachers, unrealistic demands of a boss, or whether it’s a habit acquired from years of seeking approval and acceptance, it can be modified if we accept ourselves for who we are, evaluate our use of time, and strive to maintain balance in our lives.

6.2 Don’t be afraid of fear

Some people procrastinate because they’re afraid of what might happen if they make a mistake. This is akin to perfectionism except that they are paralyzed by fear rather than by the need to do something perfectly. Thus they fail to get a medical check-up, not because it’s inconvenience, but because they’re afraid of what the results might be.

These people must acknowledge the fear and do it anyway. Although most of their fears are unfounded, they are fears, nonetheless. And we must have a burning desire to want to change or we will continue to be trapped by our own inertia.

Worry is a form of fear. And some people have so many things they can worry about these days. They get totally caught up in an emotion that not only wastes time and precipitates procrastination, but also damages their health. It could result in migraines, ulcers, burnout, emotional breakdown or worse.

Think back for a moment over the events of this past week. Then ask yourself a question: “How much time did I spend worrying?” Once you have the estimate, ask yourself another question: “What did my worrying accomplish?”

Nothing positive is ever accomplished through worry. *Concern* is a different matter. There’s nothing wrong with being concerned when your son is an hour late getting home, or your car won’t start, or you don’t have enough money to pay the mortgage. Concern prompts you to take action to rectify the situation. Concern shows that you’re human. Concern is justified. But a person who blows a real or imagined problem way out of proportion and allows it to control their thoughts to the point that they can never get it out of their mind, is not only concerned, he or she is *worried*.

If worry doesn't accomplish anything, how can we stop ourselves from worrying? The first thing we have to do is recognize that we tend to think the worst. Studies indicate that 40 percent of our worries are about things that never happen. Another 30 percent of our worries concern things that are in the past and we would be unable to do anything to change them anyway. Twelve percent of our worries are needless concerns about our health, probably due to our overactive – and pessimistic – imaginations. Ten percent of our worries are petty, miscellaneous worries. Only eight percent of our worries are about real, legitimate concerns.

6.3 Develop a positive attitude

Put your problem in perspective. Recognize the fact that some of your fears could be unfounded. Which brings us to the suggestion mentioned in a previous chapter – think positively. Nothing is as defeating as a negative attitude. Sure, your son could be late because of a car accident. But he also could have run out of gas, or stopped for a pizza, or decided to drop in on a friend on the way home. A client may not have returned a telephone call because he's not interested in doing business with your firm anymore. But he also could have been called out of the office unexpectedly or be tied up in a meeting or have forgotten about the message. Whenever you're confronted with something of concern, immediately think of three or four positive possibilities. You might as well approach life with a positive attitude, since 92 percent of the worries are unnecessary anyway.

What if there's *nothing* positive about the situation? What if it's a definite disaster? In that case, worry is still futile. You must distinguish between what you can and cannot control. If there's something you can do to change the situation or prevent something from happening, do it. Don't procrastinate. Action dissipates worry. Alternatively, worry tends to debilitate us. It inhibits productive activity and drains our resource of energy. So take action immediately. If it's impossible to take action, if it's completely beyond your control, worry is still futile. Take solace in the fact that it's not the end of the world. Deal with today's problems today, but don't make it harder on yourself by taking on tomorrow's problems as well. Whatever you do, don't let worry fester inside you. Talk it out. Discuss it with a close friend or your boss. It's surprising how much lighter a burden becomes when you vocalize it.

6.4 Plan to say no

If you fail to plan, your time will be spent working on other peoples' priorities instead of your own. People postpone activities that are important to them because of a reluctance to say *no*. It's understandable; it's so easy to say *yes*. But although we avoid the immediate pain of disappointing someone, we suffer a greater disappointment later because of an important job left unfinished.

When you plan, you determine what important tasks you would like to accomplish in the weeks and months ahead. Then you list the various steps (if more than one is required) in order to complete those tasks, and estimate the amount of time it would take to complete each step. To this you add a realistic safety factor to allow for interruptions, problems, etc., and schedule the total time in your planner.

Then, if someone asks if you’re doing anything Friday night, a quick glance at your planner will prompt you to say, “Oh, I see I have a commitment that night.” If anything has to be postponed, perhaps it should be the other person’s request. It’s easier to say *no* when a prior commitment has been made.

Many people waste time and accomplish little because of a lack of planning. Since TV networks plan their schedules well in advance, they know exactly what will be telecast Friday night. And if you don’t have Friday night planned yourself, guess who loses by default?

This doesn’t mean you should never say *yes* to a request, but it does mean you should evaluate the request to determine whether it is more important than the activity you were planning to work on in that time period. If it is more important, perhaps you should let it displace your planned activity. But never postpone your own plans simply because they *can* be postponed. This is a form of procrastination. Because of a reluctance to say *no*, many plans are never realized and goals remain unachieved.

Say *no* or *yes* solely on the basis of the importance of the request compared to the importance of your own planned activity. Make sure you *do* plan; those who don’t plan are at the mercy of those who do.

The advertisement for Linnaeus University features a bright yellow background. On the left, there is a black speech bubble containing the word 'Scholarships' in white script. Below it, the text 'Open your mind to new opportunities' is written in a large, bold, black serif font. To the right of this text is a photograph of a person in a plaid shirt and jeans performing a backflip in a modern, brightly lit interior space with large windows. In the background of the photo, several people are sitting at tables. The Linnaeus University logo, a stylized black tree, is in the top left corner. The website 'Lnu.se' is in the top right corner. At the bottom right, a black box lists various academic programs: Bachelor programmes in Business & Economics, Computer Science/IT, Design, and Mathematics; Master programmes in Business & Economics, Behavioural Sciences, Computer Science/IT, Cultural Studies & Social Sciences, Design, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, and Technology & Engineering; and Summer Academy courses. The text 'Linnaeus University Sweden' is at the bottom left.

 **Scholarships**

Open your mind to new opportunities

With 31,000 students, Linnaeus University is one of the larger universities in Sweden. We are a modern university, known for our strong international profile. Every year more than 1,600 international students from all over the world choose to enjoy the friendly atmosphere and active student life at Linnaeus University. Welcome to join us!

Linnaeus University
Sweden

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Bachelor programmes in
Business & Economics | Computer Science/IT | Design | Mathematics

Master programmes in
Business & Economics | Behavioural Sciences | Computer Science/IT | Cultural Studies & Social Sciences | Design | Mathematics | Natural Sciences | Technology & Engineering

Summer Academy courses



6.5 Delaying decisions wastes time and impedes success

Slow decision-making wastes time, as do spur-of-the-moment decisions that result in costly and time-consuming mistakes. But the worst thing you can do is procrastinate on decision-making.

Napoleon Hill once conducted a survey of successful people and found all of them were decisive. Don't be afraid of being wrong. We learn from our mistakes; but if we do nothing we neither accomplish anything nor learn anything. Here are a few decision-making tips to keep in mind:

- Delay until you have enough information, but don't wait until you have *all* the information. If you have all the information, the course of action becomes a foregone conclusion; no real decision is necessary. Have the courage to make decisions with only 70 to 80 percent of the facts. Otherwise, you're procrastinating.
- Having too many people involved in the decision-making process slows it down considerably. Invite only those people whose views are critical to the situation. Important decision-making sessions should not be used as morale-boosting participation sessions, with everyone having a say. There are other less costly ways of getting involvement.
- Delegation improves decision-making since those people on the front lines more effectively make decisions on a daily basis. Train the people who report to you, delegate authority, and trust them to decide. But be careful what you delegate. There are some decisions that can only be made at your level.
- Spend time in proportion to the importance of the decision. Don't waste a lot of time discussing the menu for the staff Christmas party. A decision to close down an operation or expand a product line warrants a greater expenditure of that costly commodity called time. Make minor decision quickly. If the consequence of the decision is not important, it is not worth much of your valuable time.
- When decisions require problem-solving tactics, hold a brainstorming session with your key people. The process could yield fresh ideas, which would not have surfaced otherwise.
- If the decision is yours alone to make, and you seem to be bogged down in the process, getting frustrated by your lack of progress, it's frequently faster in the long run to leave the problem for a while. Work on some unrelated jobs for a few hours or even a few days, then tackle the problem anew. The change in pace will revitalize your thinking. But don't don't make a habit of doing this or it's procrastination.
- Always make short-term decisions with long range objectives in mind. Don't make a *Band-Aid* decision that solves the immediate problem but results in time-consuming problems further down the road.
- Don't waste time on past decisions. Instead of saying, “If only I had,” say, “Next time I will.”

7 Helping others beat the procrastination habit

7.1 You can help others as well as yourself

If you are not a procrastinator yourself, but have to work with them, there are a few things you can do besides pass along this book. First, you should empathize with them, even if you're annoyed. Procrastination is a common timewaster that affects almost everyone to some degree. Be patient, understanding and helpful. They are only doing what comes naturally. There is usually nothing vindictive or even intentional in their action, or more accurately, inaction.

Be firm, however, in your attempts to get them moving. Place deadlines on all requests and follow up at regular intervals. Be explicit in your instructions and obtain feedback so there is no chance of a misunderstanding. Emphasize the importance of completing the task on time and the reason it's important. If the individual is a member of your staff, make it clear that the ability to adhere to deadlines is one factor that is taken into consideration when evaluating performance.

An advertisement for SKF. It features a woman with long dark hair smiling in the foreground. In the background, a large white wind turbine is visible against a blue sky. The text 'Brain power' is written in large white letters on the left. On the right, there is a block of text about wind energy and SKF's role. At the bottom left, it says 'Plug into The Power of Knowledge Engineering. Visit us at www.skf.com/knowledge'. The SKF logo is in the bottom right corner.

Brain power

By 2020, wind could provide one-tenth of our planet's electricity needs. Already today, SKF's innovative know-how is crucial to running a large proportion of the world's wind turbines.

Up to 25 % of the generating costs relate to maintenance. These can be reduced dramatically thanks to our systems for on-line condition monitoring and automatic lubrication. We help make it more economical to create cleaner, cheaper energy out of thin air.

By sharing our experience, expertise, and creativity, industries can boost performance beyond expectations. Therefore we need the best employees who can meet this challenge!

The Power of Knowledge Engineering

Plug into The Power of Knowledge Engineering.
Visit us at www.skf.com/knowledge

SKF

Before giving an assignment to a procrastinator, anticipate the reasons that they may have for delaying the task. If they claim that it's a big job, tell them that's the reason that you are providing more time. Explain that if they start right away and do a little each day, they will have more than enough time. If they claim that they are too busy, be prepared to discuss the projects that they have on their plates, the priority of each, and how they could budget their time in order to complete them. Don't be too quick to offer help by transferring tasks to someone else or volunteering to do them yourself. If you make it too easy for them, it will *encourage* procrastination rather than prevent it. But recognize that they can't do everything at once and be prepared to reprioritize some of the other projects if necessary.

Look for signs that they lack confidence in themselves and offer encouragement. Bolster their egos by reminding them of some past accomplishment. Make your trust in their abilities obvious. Be quick to praise them for small successes as they work on their assignments.

Procrastinators need structure, so put instructions and expected completion dates in writing. Have a pre-determined series of reporting dates in place. Record these dates in your planner so you will be sure to follow up on schedule.

Don't overlook the possibility that they need on-the-job training and self-development courses. Time management, personal organization, goal-setting and project management training are particularly helpful to procrastinators. Assure them that you or others are available for guidance or advice. Let them know that they are not being left alone to sink or swim.

When evaluating their progress, don't compare them to others or to yourself. Determine whether there is any improvement compared to their past behavior. Everyone is unique and develops at different rates. The important thing is that they continue to improve their performance with time. Be sure to communicate this improvement to them; don't wait for the formal performance review to offer feedback and encouragement.

Finally, share with them some of the ideas contained in this book, including the advantages of doing distasteful tasks during their prime time, scheduling blocks of time in their planner to work on assignments and chipping away at large tasks a little at a time during spare moments.

Before you label anyone a procrastinator, make sure their delays are not merely isolated incidents beyond their control. Procrastination is the intentional and continual postponement of a task that should be done now. The odd postponement is neither unusual nor serious. And don't assign trivial or useless tasks that are better eliminated. As long as there are important tasks undone, the trivial tasks *should* be postponed.

7.2 Twenty-five ways to overcome procrastination

The ideas summarized below should serve as assists in kicking the procrastination habit, regardless of its underlying cause. Choose those ideas that you feel would help you or would help those working with you. All of them have been found helpful to some people.

- ☐ Set a goal for the task you've been putting off. Pick a specific date to do it, and schedule time in your planner to get it done.
- ☐ List the advantages of doing the task and compare them with the consequences of not doing it. The result may convince you that it should be done.
- ☐ List the things you have been putting off, choose the simplest task and do it. This small success should motivate you to tackle other, more difficult tasks that you have been delaying.
- ☐ Decide on a reward for finishing a task that you have been delaying. Example: a coffee break, new dress, a night on the town. Provide yourself with an incentive to get it done.
- ☐ Break down the overwhelming tasks into chunks, and do them a little at a time.
- ☐ Schedule the task in your prime time when you are at your peak mentally and physically. For most people this is first thing in the morning.
- ☐ If the task you've been putting off is work-related, put the appropriate paperwork or other material on your desk when you go home so it alone will be visible when you arrive the next morning.
- ☐ Commit yourself to doing the task at a definite time and tell others of your plans. Many of us will act to avoid the embarrassment of not doing what we told our peers we would do.
- ☐ Get help. Delegate some of the distasteful tasks, or share the task with others willing to help.
- ☐ Do absolutely nothing. Some people find they get bored and will tackle anything rather than remain idle.
- ☐ Place deadlines on all tasks that you have been putting off.
- ☐ Keep telling yourself, "If it's unpleasant, I'll do it now and get it over with."
- ☐ If you tend to be a perfectionist, recognize that good is good enough and that it's better to get it done than to delay until it can be perfect.
- ☐ If you're afraid of failing, acknowledge the fear and do it anyway. Recognize that successful people fail more because they try more.
- ☐ Disorganization breeds procrastination; so get organized.
- ☐ Tackle the distasteful tasks when you're on a high – when you have just accomplished something significant and feel good about yourself.
- ☐ Accept full responsibility for the task; don't allow excuses to lull you into procrastination.

- ☐ Engage in positive self-talk. Be optimistic. Attitude can make a difference.
- ☐ Force yourself to start. Once started, you'll build momentum. Keep starting, and you'll develop the *do it now* habit.
- ☐ Don't wait until you have more time; you will probably have no more time in the future than you have right now.
- ☐ If you don't feel like working on the task, do something small that will take you in the right direction. Getting started is the hardest part of doing.
- ☐ Recognize that you have a choice to either do something or not to do it. Take full responsibility for how you spend your time.
- ☐ Don't put yourself on a guilt trip if you *do* procrastinate once in a while. It's okay not to be perfect.
- ☐ Strengthen your brain-based executive skills as covered in my book, *Your brain has a mind of its own* (Bookboon.com, 2014).

Trust and responsibility

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Inés Aréizaga Esteva (Spain), 25 years old
Education: Chemical Engineer

– You have to be proactive and open-minded as a newcomer and make it clear to your colleagues what you are able to cope. The pharmaceutical field is new to me. But busy as they are, most of my colleagues find the time to teach me, and they also trust me. Even though it was a bit hard at first, I can feel over time that I am beginning to be taken seriously and that my contribution is appreciated.



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8 Conclusion

Don't be discouraged if you procrastinate. Everybody does it at one time or another. It's a natural tendency. But you can increase your effectiveness tenfold if you are able to curb this tendency. To do this requires conscious effort on your part. But you *can* do it, either by sheer self-discipline or by practicing some of the techniques described in this book. In either case you must *want* to change. The more you want to change, the easier the process becomes. Motivation plays a big role in any behavioral change.

If you are a chronic procrastinator, i.e., you intentionally and habitually postpone tasks that should be done now, you will gain the most from reviewing this brief book and immediately applying some of its suggestions. Start with a task or activity whose delay has been causing some problems. Resolve now that you will never procrastinate on that job again. This is not to say that you will not put off *other* tasks. But concentrate on never putting off that one selected task.

It's important that you don't try to stop procrastinating on everything at once. This in itself would be an overwhelming assignment doomed to failure. Tackle your problem a bite at a time, one job at a time. When you are confident that you no longer procrastinate on that one job, pick another one and direct your energies there. Procrastination is defeated one task at a time. Each small success is motivational and will make your next resolve easier.

Don't be discouraged if you slip once in a while. Developing the *do it now* habit is a process, not an event. Each time you succeed, the process becomes a little easier. Success breeds success.

Congratulations on taking the first step in a process that will help you procrastinate less and gain control of your time and your life.

9 About the author

Harold Taylor, CSP, president of Taylor In Time.com (formerly Harold Taylor Time Consultants Ltd), has been speaking, writing and conducting training programs on the topic of effective time management for over 30 years. He has written 18 books, including a Canadian bestseller, *Making Time Work for You*. He has developed over 50 time management products, including the popular *Taylor Planner*, which has sold in 38 countries around the world. He has had over 300 articles accepted for publication.

A past director of the *National Association of Professional Organizers*, Harold Taylor received their *Founder's Award* in 1999 for outstanding contributions to the organizing profession. He received the CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) designation in 1987 from the *National Speakers Association*. In 1998 the *Canadian Association of Professional Speakers* inducted him into the Canadian Speaking Hall of Fame. And in 2001, he received the first *Founder's Award* from the *Professional Organizers in Canada*. The award has been named the "Harold Taylor Award" in his honor.

Since 1981, when he incorporated the original time management company, he has personally presented over 2000 workshops, speeches and keynotes on the topic of time and life management.