

How to stop procrastinating when working from home

Work-from-home arrangements that came about because of the pandemic offer many opportunities to procrastinate

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Leonardo da Vinci is one of the greatest and most influential artists of the Italian Renaissance, and perhaps the most diversely talented person ever to have lived. Yet back in his day, he was known for never completing his work on time. In 1515, he was given seven months to paint the Mona Lisa for a politician's visit to Rome. The painting was not presented during the visit because he completed it only 15 years later.

Evidently, even the better of us suffer from procrastination at one point or another. What does procrastination mean and what exactly are we dealing with here?

Procrastination is the voluntary delay of an action despite expecting to be worse off for it. In fact, research shows that almost 61 per cent of us procrastinate, of which 20 per cent do so chronically.

You know the feeling. You are finally about to work when suddenly that familiar voice tempts you to check your phone. Before you know it, you find yourself in a YouTube spiral - unsure of how you got there, and with a report due in the next hour.

You might have noticed more of such behaviour since the Covid-19 pandemic began, and you would not be the only one. According to a Pulse of the Singapore Workforce study released in June last year, up to 43 per cent of employees reported reduced productivity working from home. This is unsurprising since this arrangement exposes us to more distractions while depriving us of external motivators for work. Combining these factors with increased stress and uncertainty, our productivity has plummeted amid the pandemic.

Is procrastination even a problem?

Pandemic-fuelled procrastination can affect your health. Chronic procrastination is associated with various medical conditions including colds and flus, headaches, and cardiovascular disease. These negative health effects occur, on the one hand, because procrastinators often delay healthy behaviour like exercising regularly and seeking medical treatment. On the other hand, procrastination produces stressful experiences like completing work at the last minute or cramming for an exam. If repeated frequently, this contributes to chronically high stress hormone levels that suppress the body's immune function and increase the risk of stress-related health conditions such as gastrointestinal problems and insomnia.

Reasons for procrastination

One common misconception about procrastination is that it is caused by laziness.

Extensive research in psychology has shown this to be untrue. Though often confused with each other, laziness and procrastination are actually two different things. Laziness simply means being comfortable and satisfied with not achieving anything, whereas procrastination is more complex. Procrastinators want to accomplish something, but their actions prevent them from doing so.

Procrastination is fundamentally the result of a disconnect between our present and future selves. When we procrastinate, we are indulging the present self in immediate, short-term pleasures while leaving the future self to suffer the consequences. We do this because humans have a present bias that makes us shortsighted in our goals, wiring us to value instant gratification such as from funny TikTok videos over far-off rewards like the satisfaction of productivity. Thus, procrastination comes from prioritising the present self.

The divide between your present and future selves is widened when you lack clarity on your goals and the steps needed to achieve it. Very often, we procrastinate because we set goals that are too vague and abstract, for instance, saying you want to "get fit" or "learn French". When you are unclear about what exactly you need to work on, when exactly you should be working on it, and how you are supposed to do it effectively, you are more likely to say "tomorrow", "next week", or "next time".

Research has consistently found that when people were required to think of a task more concretely, they completed the assigned task earlier regardless of its allure, difficulty and importance. As Benjamin Franklin aptly put it, "if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail", and this is one of the reasons why we procrastinate.

Negative emotions, high expectations

Psychological studies have consistently demonstrated that at other times, fear, self-doubt and anxiety are the obstacles preventing us from aligning our present and future selves. These negative emotions typically arise when we feel high expectations or pressure towards a given task, but the heightened stress and uncertainty from the pandemic has made this an even more prevalent reason for procrastination.

From neuroscience research, we know that when we are overwhelmed with negative emotions, the primitive side of our brain dominates decision-making. This means that we become more impulsive and favour short-term pleasures at the expense of long-term goals. As a result, we turn to watching mukbang (South Korean binge-eating viral show) or shopping online for things we don't need because these act as immediate mood lifters that help us escape negative emotions.

Finally, we sometimes procrastinate simply because we can't get the ball rolling. The resistance we have to a task is usually highest before we begin, but once you start acting on it, it's a lot easier to keep going. Indeed, a study from Carleton University in Canada revealed that once university students actually began a task, they rated it as far less difficult and stressful than they had when they were procrastinating about it. Thus, our present and future selves are sometimes not aligned simply because we haven't started.

Set concrete and achievable goals

Knowing the root cause is a good starting point to overcoming procrastination, but to turn these insights into action, here are some evidence-based strategies.

The first step is setting concrete and achievable goals. This means being highly specific. Instead of vague statements like "I'm going to work on my report", try something more measurable like "I'm going to write the introduction to my report".

It's also crucial to be time-specific. A good example could be: "On Tuesday at 3.30pm, I'm going to write the introduction of my report." Writing your goals this way concretises your intentions, empowering you to act.

After determining what you want to achieve, imagine how you are going to do it. Visualise yourself overcoming the obstacles surrounding that task you have been dreading. It's important to vividly picture the specific process rather than the outcome, however, as this better connects you to your future self. With this, you'll be more aware of how your present actions affect you in the long run, persuading you to make sacrifices today that benefit you tomorrow.

Now, it's time to finally start work. To overcome the inertia of getting started, identify the very smallest action. Something that's so easy you can't not do it. Note that this is different from breaking down a huge task into a long list of smaller tasks.

For instance, if you find it difficult to motivate yourself to go for a run, reduce it to the smallest action - wearing your shoes. This makes the task appear much easier and more achievable, which can motivate us into that initial action necessary to generate momentum and focus.

Besides that, it helps divert our attention away from the debilitating stress and pressure we associate with the task, putting us on the path to the future self we desire.

If all else fails and you still end up procrastinating, be kinder to and more understanding of yourself. When we fail to achieve our aims, we frequently ruminate and stress over it, which can make us procrastinate more. Self-compassion interrupts this downward spiral of negative self-talk and procrastination.

So, the next time you procrastinate, avoid getting in your head and labelling yourself as lazy or a failure. Instead, just forgive yourself, set an intention to complete a small part of the task, and just get started.

Above all, procrastination happens to the best of us. Though we may be wired to favour the present and the pandemic has created more obstacles to productivity, it is vital that we recognise procrastination and equip ourselves with various tools and systems to overcome it. This is something we can all start developing today, or maybe leave till tomorrow.

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