

Overcoming Procrastination

Most people procrastinate (put things off) at some time or another. This doesn't have to be a big deal.

However, when it becomes a habit that has a negative impact on your work and social life, pinpointing the reasons why you are procrastinating and addressing these, can help you move on decisively and become more efficient and productive.

Tips to help you stop procrastinating

Recognise the signs

The main thing is to recognise when procrastination is becoming a problem and do something about it – don't put this off too! Typical signs include:

- Jumping from one task to another without completing anything
- Continually thinking about certain tasks without actually doing them
- Avoiding solving problems
- Leaving everything to the deadline
- Feeling that things are getting on top of you
- Feeling like you're getting nowhere
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Fatigue and anxiety.

Ask yourself what and why

You need to pinpoint the areas you are procrastinating in and why this is happening. You might want to ask a friend to help you because you may need to dig deep to find the real source. For example, the reason why you are not completing one project may not be because you don't like the work (as you've been telling yourself) but because you lack confidence in your ability to complete the work. Being honest with yourself is important – if you are to find a cure, you need to treat the real symptom.

Consider the following common reasons for procrastination and corresponding suggestions for breaking the habit:



You're bored/lack of job satisfaction

Realistically, most jobs include areas that we're not keen on. However, they need to be undertaken because they are either valuable or necessary, e.g., we need to find new clients and sell them our work to ensure work continuity and we need to complete our tax returns. If this is the case, useful motivation techniques include:

- Imagining how great you'll feel when the job is finished – a weight off your mind that frees you up to truly concentrate on other tasks
- Breaking up work that is unpalatable into small chunks
- Reminding yourself of the work's value and how completing it will benefit you
- Putting the work into perspective, e.g., making cold calls is a small price to pay to create new work opportunities
- Making the work as enjoyable as possible, e.g., get comfortable and put on some music
- Recognising that it'll be on your mind anyway, so you may as well get on and do it rather than let it distract you
- Changing your attitude – is the work really boring or do you just perceive it as such? Is there a way to make it more interesting or learn from it?

Also, consider if you really need to be the one to do a particular task. For example, if you genuinely dislike doing your accounts and there's no way that is going to change, is it worth paying (in opportunity cost terms) someone else to do it?

If you're bored or dissatisfied with a large percentage of what you do, you may have a bigger question to answer: is it time to re-assess your career goals and move in a different direction? This might mean considerable change over a period of time and the implementation of a well thought out development strategy. However, putting in the effort is better than remaining in an uncomfortable comfort zone that is making you miserable, anxious and unproductive (for more info on career planning, try our e-course Business Skills for Freelances at www.feustraining.org).

You're overwhelmed

We all bite off more than we can chew at some point or another and sometimes juggling tasks to meet multi-deadlines can be a buzz. However, if you have so much to do that it's stopping you from getting on with anything, you may need to take a step back to figure out how you can get more organised and prioritise your work (for more information, go to the digital learning centre for our e-course Business Skills for Freelances – M5. Organisation and planning).



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The basics of becoming more productive include:

- Forward planning – decide what you must do today, this week this month and this year.
- Make a list and prioritise so that you do the most important things first (even if you don't like doing them).
- Estimate the time each task will take. Self-imposed deadlines are useful. They also help you to give yourself realistic targets so you're not overwhelmed before you start and so that you avoid expanding work indefinitely.
- Delegate tasks where possible – not easy if you're a freelance but there will be some things that you can ask others to do.
- Assess which times of the day are best for doing particular tasks, e.g., you might be most creative in the morning so don't waste this time answering random emails at this point in the day.

Even if you've let things pile up so much that everything seems like a priority, you have to start somewhere. So, take a deep breath and try to start thinking clearly. Avoidance won't help so prioritise your priorities (this might mean missing some deadlines and having to clean up afterwards) but better than doing nothing and letting everything slip.

Once you have got one thing out of the way, you'll feel motivated to move on to the next. You'll also find that many of things that you have been putting off are not as difficult as you perceived them to be.

Remember to give yourself a massive pat on the back each time you complete a task. Also, learn from this process – we all lose control at some point or another but it is possible to get back on track.

You lack confidence

Doubting that you can do something is a self-fulfilling prophecy and is often about perception rather than reality. If you lack confidence you need to ask yourself why. For example:

- Have you had a bad experience in the past? If so, why did this happen? If you made a mistake or lacked ability, it's in your control to change things next time. Find out how you can improve and make steps to do so.
- If you think what happened was unfair you need to let it go and de-personalise it – don't let things that are out of your control continue to damage your future ("I should coco!). Don't waste energy replaying negative images unless you're learning from them. Concentrate on all the things that you can do to help yourself.
- Are you inexperienced? If so, the only way to build confidence is to take a leap of faith and get the practise you need. Remind yourself of all the brilliant things you've done in the past and get excited about the potential of the new adventures you are about to embark upon – why put things off when you've got so much to gain?



- Do you need to learn new skills? Success is about playing to your strengths and addressing your weaknesses. This takes self-awareness, a willingness to admit that you're out of your depth and the initiative to do something about it (for more on career development, go to the digital learning centre for our e-course Business Skills for Freelances – M6. Planning your career route and our Quick Tips module).
- Are you a perfectionist? It's great to have high standards but it's important to realise when something is 'good enough' and let it go so you can move on to the next task – and also make some money! You'll need to be shrewd here because 'good enough' is defined by your market, e.g., if the client is happy, why are you spending an extra day making tweaks?
- Do you fear the outcome? Nobody wants their 'baby' to be turned down but it's so depressing, boring and de-motivating to keep going over and over something without finishing it.

It's better to find out if there is a market for what you're doing sooner rather than later. Firstly, it may well be a 'yay' so you can get on with the celebration rather than faffing around making yourself miserable. If 'nay', at least you won't waste any more time on a pup and can move on with your next creation. Remember, that if you get a 'no' now from one person, this doesn't necessarily mean a 'no' forever from everyone. You might have to adapt and tout your ideas around or file them for future use.

You lack concentration

This may be the result of one or all of the above examples. Concentration is a bit like a muscle – if you don't use it, it becomes weak. So, you'll need to start building it up again which may take some discipline. Go back to the cause of your lack of concentration (see above). Prioritise your tasks, make a list of what you need to do and stick to it.

You might have to be strict with yourself: "I am not leaving this computer until I have finished the first draft of this story." Or if that's too hard, break it up: "I will not do anything else apart from this story for one hour."

Avoid concentration-breakers (which help us procrastinate) like email, telephone calls and moving on to easier or more enjoyable tasks. You'll find that your concentration levels improve quickly once you've set your mind to it – especially when you see the rewards of your efforts. You'll also feel far less stressed as you start moving forward.

Whatever your reasons for procrastination, the longer you avoid doing anything about it, the worse it will get. Breaking any bad habit takes commitment, time and effort but remember that you are the one who will ultimately benefit from taking that first step in the right direction.

More information

If you need to ask questions or chat to your peers about ways of stopping procrastination, join our 'Freelance Challenge Forum' at www.feutraining.org



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