

7 Top Tips to Turn Procrastination into Action

By Ute Wieczorek-King and Gerry Hyde

"I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours." Jerome K Jerome

Procrastination is something we are all familiar with, being able to produce a list of overdue jobs that we never get round to.

Even with a well structured To Do List (please refer to our other article

<http://www.successnetwork.org.uk/articles.htm>)

there will always be the odd task that either stays on the list or gets transferred to another list, perhaps remaining there for days or weeks or even months!

Whether it's the tax return, a report with a fluid deadline, a newsletter, article or blog we've wanted to write for ages, a presentation we need to prepare, something seems to be holding us back. We then find reasons (or excuses?) why we can't start a task and keep ourselves busy doing something else.

Whilst there are many reasons to procrastinate, here are seven tips to turn procrastination into action:

1. Saying 'No' when You're Doing Too Much

One of the most common causes of procrastination is overwhelm and having too much to do. Women in particular often take too much on without being fully aware of the overall time they have available. In an attempt to cope with a heavy workload it is tempting to be selective and choose the easier more enjoyable jobs over the challenging or boring ones.

As it can be easy to underestimate how long some tasks take, procrastinators often wait for a deadline before acknowledging that something can't be avoided any longer. Some people insist they work better under pressure, not realising the urgency dictated by a deadline can lead to a reduction in the quality of their work. It can also create stress which could be avoided by taking better control of the time available.

Keeping a record of the time some tasks take to complete may be useful or you could ask other people for rough estimates of the time they take for similar tasks. The next step is to allocate a realistic amount of time in your diary and check whether it is actually possible to achieve all your jobs in the time you have available.

Sometimes it helps to take control by saying 'no' - either by letting something go or by delegating if that is possible. By communicating this to the relevant people, you are taking responsibility for your time which is a proactive solution to avoiding jobs.

2. Focus on the Benefits of Achieving Tasks

When lacking motivation to get started, it helps to think ahead and imagine yourself as having completed the task. By visualising a positive outcome and focusing on the benefits of the task, you have a clearer understanding of why the task is important to you.



Try to focus on what you will gain, learn or achieve, and what this will help you to do in the long run! Then consider what will happen if you don't do it! Whilst focusing on the positive outcome works for some, others need to be aware of the potential negative outcome of not doing a task. Avoiding something unpleasant may provide the motivation required to take appropriate action.

3. Set Small Goals

When a piece of work is overwhelming it is much easier to break it down into bite-size manageable steps. These actions can then be put on the To Do list with individual end times. Some tasks may even be delegated to someone else. Setting small achievable goals provides a sense of accomplishment and therefore motivates you to continue with the overall task.

4. Get Prepared

One of the best ways to focus on the task in hand is to make sure you have everything you need before you start. Think of it like baking a cake: in the kitchen you would clear a surface, gather all the ingredients together and go through the process step by step.

In a work situation, begin by clearing your desk so you only have everything you need, or think you need, for the task. The tidier the desk is before you begin, the easier it is to get started and to keep the momentum going. It is extremely effective if this is done the night before so you are ready to start on the task as the first priority of the day.

To remain focused, switch off mobiles, e-mail, Twitter and Instant Messaging alerts, and set yourself times to check these throughout the day. You can manage expectations by setting an out of office on your e-mail saying you check your e-mail at say 12.00 pm and 3.30 pm each day and will respond to urgent enquires then. These are all HUGE time stealers and need to be managed effectively.

5. Use a Small Trick to get Started



When faced with a task you can no longer ignore, typical avoidance tactics are to go and have a coffee, make a call and chat to someone, surf the internet, or pick a much easier task off the list, pretending it is more important.

Next time you hear a nagging little voice reminding you to get started how about saying to yourself, 'I'll just do 5 minutes of this'. Doing just 5 minutes helps you get some paperwork ready, or open the relevant file on your computer. By setting a timer for 5 minutes you may find that you'll do a little more than just open the file. Before you know it, the timer goes off and you think, 'this wasn't so bad, I'll do a little more on this'.

With a long to do list of things you may not want to do, like cold calling or follow up calls, how about just getting the phone numbers ready and setting your timer? You'll probably find yourself thinking 'I'll just make one call' with one call leading to the next and so on.

If you do this regularly you'll find it much easier to tackle the things you don't want to do.

6. Take a Break

When you've tried the above tips but are still procrastinating on a task, it is sometimes beneficial to consciously decide to take a short break and have a change of scenery. At times like this it is best to do something active but requires little thought – for example, walking to the post box, putting some washing on, watering the garden. By moving about and giving your brain a distraction you are having a break and also accomplishing another task that needs to be done! When you go back to your work task you will have renewed enthusiasm for working towards the end goal.

7. Reward Yourself

Once you have finished a task that you previously procrastinated on, it is important to acknowledge your achievement and reward yourself. It is a good idea to have some downtime too, giving yourself permission to do the things you love – reading a book, watching a movie or walking the dog and while doing this, keep your mind completely free of all thoughts about work, to do lists and projects. This time is essential in both resting and motivating your mind before starting all over again!

What works for Ute:

I love my work, am highly motivated, focused and productive, but I too find myself procrastinating from time to time. I get back on track by focusing on my overall goal which helps me realise that the task I've been avoiding is part of a bigger picture and without completing it I may not achieve my goal. What also works for me is grouping boring tasks and allocating time slots for them in my Outlook calendar. This way they don't interfere with my more enjoyable creative tasks. Saying to myself, "I'll just do 5 minutes of this", often gets me started. I always give myself a pat on the shoulder when I've tackled something I've been avoiding, and enjoy the sense of achievement.

What works for Gerry:

When I'm aware I'm procrastinating on a particular task I ask myself a couple of questions: Am I prioritising my workload?; Is it a boring task?; Do I feel out of my comfort zone?; Is it something fun but I feel I should be doing other things first? I then examine the deadlines, set myself a goal to complete the task by a certain time and then break it down into bite-size chunks. By taking it one step at a time makes me start the project and gives me the momentum to carry on. Setting a deadline gives me the pressure to focus and complete. Finally, I always celebrate when I've finished – and this may be as simple as dancing around the office with the dog (!) – as I like to recognise and enjoy the sense of achievement and success of finally completing the piece of work.

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