Procrastination at Work: Why it happens and how to curb it

A little bit of procrastination at the office is surprisingly common, with 88% of workers reporting that they put off important work tasks for at least one hour each day. *Yet, procrastination at work is a much more severe problem for some workers.* 15 - 20% of workers say they avoid important tasks regularly, which qualifies as chronic procrastination. As you can imagine, this level of procrastination causes serious productivity issues and can lead to employees getting fired.

While putting off work is often viewed as a result of laziness or a lack of motivation — the problem runs a bit deeper than that, which is why so many employees have trouble trying to stop procrastinating. It turns out that many procrastinators care *too much* about their work, causing them to place unrealistic expectations on themselves.

In a nutshell, it's a bad habit that's tough to break, and it's more prevalent than you may think.

That's why we've put together this guide breaking down what procrastination is, why it happens, its causes, and how to break the habit ultimately. Read on to learn more about the causes of procrastination and how you can stop it in its tracks.

The different ways to procrastinate at work

Procrastination can manifest itself in several different ways in a work environment, and it's important to familiarize yourself with each type, which includes:

- Online procrastination

- Offline procrastination

- Presenteeism

- Work-related procrastination

- Non-work-related procrastination

Each type is unique, as they each have unique incentives and adverse effects, so let's learn more about each.

Online procrastination

From secretly checking social media to focusing on less critical work tasks to avoid starting a crucial project — there are many different types of procrastination.

Also called cyberslacking, this type of procrastination involves surfing the web and using mobile applications during work hours. Any co-worker checking social media notifications instead of reading employee emails qualifies as online procrastination.

Wasting time online is by far the most prevalent type of procrastination seen at work, as CareerBuilder lists the following as the top workplace distractions:

- Smartphone use

- Internet surfing

- Social media

Over half of the participants reported using their smartphones the most to avoid work, while 44% cited browsing the internet as their biggest distraction.

How can you remedy this issue at your organization?

Technology-related procrastination is relatively easy to stop by implementing a no-phone policy during the workday. If managers catch employees constantly playing on their phones instead of working, they can take disciplinary action.

To avoid aimless web browsing, you can restrict non-work-related websites or monitor employee URLs via software (as long as you're transparent with your employees about it).

Offline procrastination

Technology can't take all the blame for procrastination at work, as there are plenty of ways to waste time offline.

Examples include:

- Gossiping with co-workers

- Taking frequent and/or extended bathroom breaks

- Loitering around the coffee machine or water cooler

- Taking too many smoke or snack breaks

- Daydreaming instead of working

- Chatting with co-workers

These are all examples of avoiding work without the use of technology. In the CareerBuilder poll, 37% of respondents reported frequent gossip, while 27% admitted to making the rounds to chat with fellow employees about topics unrelated to work.

This type of procrastination also goes by the name *soldiering*, which is a military term for pretending to work to escape punishment.

While taking infrequent, short breaks is typically innocuous, too many can start to affect productivity negatively. As a manager or supervisor, you need to keep a close eye on employees' behavioral habits to spot instances of soldiering whenever they occur.

It's crucial to carefully consider the situation whenever accusing an employee of procrastinating, so discretion is key here. If you're constantly reprimanding your employees for engaging in small talk or taking short breaks, it could lead to feelings of resentment, which isn't what you want.
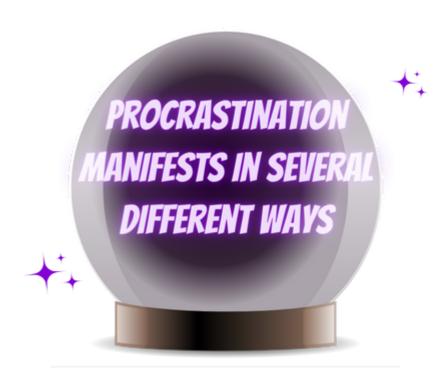
Presenteeism

Another form of procrastination at work is presenteeism, which often gets misunderstood.

What's that?

Presenteeism is where a worker intends to complete their work, but an illness or medical condition brings their productivity to a screeching halt.

An example would be a worker attempting to knock out their to-do list but only checking off an item or two due to a debilitating migraine. In this case, the employee intends to complete the work and does not want to procrastinate. However, their crushing headache is a serious distraction that affects their ability to perform.

PROCRASTINATION MANIFESTS IN SEVERAL DIFFERENT WAYS

Presenteeism can be difficult to spot, as affected employees often look completely normal from their outward appearance. They can be present and at their desk, appearing to work on a particular task, but inside they're foggy and unfocused.

Below are a few examples of issues that may impact work:

- Migraines or other forms of headaches

- Allergies

- Pain (arthritis, back, neck, and joint pain)

- Excessive hunger or a blood sugar crash

- Gastrointestinal issues (nausea, diarrhea, etc.)

- Depression and anxiety

As you can probably attest to, it isn't easy to maintain crystal clear focus when dealing with one of the conditions listed above. Presenteeism can affect well-being, self-control, coordination, focus, decision-making, and other cognitive functions.

How can you fight back against presenteeism?

There are several ways to do so — with the most prevalent being an open communication policy with employees. If someone isn't feeling up to the task on any given day, they should tell you about it.

That's especially true if the condition holding them back is treatable (such as providing medication for headaches and allergies or allowing a snack break for a blood sugar drop). You can also offer resources for your employees, such as free consults with an allergy specialist to ensure your staff feels good enough to function.

Work-related and non-work-related procrastination

Lastly, it's essential to distinguish between work-related and non-work-related procrastination, as most aren't aware of the difference.

For a majority of employers out there, for something to qualify as procrastination, it can't directly involve work-related tasks. This refers to non-work-related procrastination, such as the types listed above (online, offline, and presenteeism).

Yet, this isn't the only way to avoid work, and it fails to acknowledge work-related procrastination.

What's that?

It's where an employee puts off an urgent project or task by focusing on other tasks that are simpler or less pressing. For instance, an employee may spend all day sorting and filing their emails instead of outlining and working on a project that has closely approaching due dates. They're still technically working, but they aren't focusing on the most critical tasks, either avoiding them altogether or leaving them for the end of the day.

If a project is especially intimidating, the fear of failure may motivate an employee to put it off for as long as humanly possible by knocking out smaller, less pressing tasks instead. For this reason, it's critical to acknowledge the existence of work-related procrastination to salvage your waning productivity.

How prevalent is procrastination at work?

Now that you know more about the various ways procrastination rears its ugly head, how common is it in today's workforce?

It turns out that putting off work is extremely common, with it accounting for up to a quarter of most employees' workdays - spanning nearly every industry and career type.

Procrastinating isn't something that only exists at the bottom of the hierarchy, either, as it exists at all levels — from base employees up to executives. 25% of adults even list procrastination as one of their defining personality traits.

Yet, not all procrastination is created equal, as some job types have been found to avoid work more than others.

For instance, one study discovered that white-collar workers are more likely to procrastinate than blue-collar workers. White-collar workers reported significantly higher scores on the three measured forms of chronic procrastination the study used.

Another study took an in-depth look at over 22,000 workers and created the following categories:

- **High procrastination jobs**. These are the positions that the researchers found procrastinated the most. The jobs included legal secretaries, food and beverage staff, computer system administrators, salespeople, and library assistants.

- **Moderate procrastination jobs**. These positions were found to procrastinate less, but still a fair bit. Positions included general operations managers, lawyers, photographers, and creative writers.

- **Low procrastination jobs**. Lastly, these jobs reported the lowest levels of procrastination and included positions like loan officers, CEOs, librarians, and economists.

While it's not entirely clear why these variations exist, it's speculated that certain positions attract people that are more likely to procrastinate.

Structuring a position to avoid procrastination

Whether or not an employee will put off work also comes down to the structure of the position itself. For instance, if a job features well-structured tasks, clear goals, and proper monitoring by others, tenacity is encouraged and rewarded. As such, positions like these aren't likely to see as much procrastination.

Yet, if a job's tasks are unclear with a lack of management and incentives/goals, it's the perfect recipe for procrastination at work. Examples include working in an unstructured or self-structured work environment (remote work included) and distraction-heavy positions (such as social media managers).

It depends on the person, too

The structure and nature of the work environment can only account for so much, as the employee's personality also plays a significant role in procrastination. After all, everyone is different, so we can't point to one position and claim everyone will procrastinate in it.

In fact, some employees in typically procrastination-heavy roles don't waste time at all. The opposite is also

true, as some employees will give into procrastination even in more physically demanding positions, such as construction.

Employees may also exhibit different levels of procrastination within the same position depending on a few factors, including:

- Their ability to self-regulate their behavior.

- How well can they avoid temptation from outside distractions.

Someone with a lot of self-control is less likely to procrastinate than someone who doesn't have much, regardless of their position or work environment.

The degree to which employees procrastinate is also contextual, as sometimes they may procrastinate more than others. An example would be an employee avoiding important work on a day when they didn't get much sleep the night prior. Or it could be that a superior gave them a new project yet didn't provide ample direction on executing it — causing the employee to put it off.

Whatever the reason may be, procrastination is a prevalent issue that affects all industries, organizations, and businesses worldwide, but what causes it?

The primary reasons why people procrastinate at work

Think back to the last time you avoided a crucial task at work until the last minute; what was your motivation? Maybe you were too exhausted from the night before, or you were intimidated by the scope and nature of the work and didn't want to make a mistake — so you put it off until the last second.

If that sounds familiar, it's because those happen to be the two most common causes of procrastination; **exhaustion** and **anxiety**.

When we're functioning normally, our self-control and motivation act as the driving forces behind our productivity at work. Yet, if we become too tired or anxious, these feelings can supersede our motivation, causing us to fall down a rabbit hole of procrastination as a result.

Procrastinating due to anxiety

This reason for procrastinating has to do with mental health and is particularly apparent in both perfectionists and those with a lack of self-esteem in their work.

For someone with perfectionism, an important new project can cause anxiety due to the employee's desire to produce flawless work. Once the project's brevity begins to set in, the employee avoids the work because they're afraid of making a mistake.

Conversely, an employee that lacks self-esteem in their work faces the same issue, albeit for a different reason. Instead of not wanting to make a mistake, this type of employee doesn't want to fail. Their major fear is making a significant error that either ruins the project or costs them their job.

This anxiety causes them to seek an escape through procrastinating, which allows them to temporarily run away from the fear of failing.

Procrastination due to exhaustion

This is the physical side of the coin: you procrastinate due to feeling tired or burned out. A common reason for this is when an employee gets worked too hard without a break. For instance, if a team member has worked 12 days straight without any days off, they're less likely to be as productive as they would if they had a break.

It's a good idea to ensure that your employees aren't overworked and have reasonable schedules to avoid this issue.

Other reasons employees procrastinate

While anxiety and exhaustion are the two most significant causes of procrastination, they're far from the only ones.

Other notable causes include:

- Avoiding a task because it's excessively boring or unpleasant.

- Feeling out of place at a job that doesn't match your skill set.

- A lack of clear goals (poor project management).

- When the work environment is too noisy or distracting.

- If there's a lack of support when employees are lost.

- Resentment for unfair treatment or toxic management.

These problems may cause employees to procrastinate, so don't forget about them.

Tips to overcome procrastination at work

Now that you know more about procrastination and its underlying cause, let's learn how to reduce it in your organization (and your own work).

Turn on the light (realize there's a problem)

The first step is to understand that you have a problem with procrastination in the first place.

How do you do that?

You can start by analyzing your productivity metrics through software or raw calculations. Also, coordinate with your managers and supervisors to determine if procrastination is a problem at your office.

For yourself, take a look at all that you get done during a given day. Did you accomplish everything you set out to do or put it all off? That's a surefire way to know if you have a problem with procrastination.

Don't hesitate to take action

Now that you know there's an issue, you need to tackle it head-on. In other words, you shouldn't procrastinate when dealing with procrastination.

For most procrastinators, taking the first step is the hardest one, so knocking it out as soon as possible is a good idea.

Once you start gaining some momentum, it'll get easier as you go on. To reduce procrastination in the office, call a meeting with your staff to share new policies with them, such as speaking up if they don't feel well enough to do their job for the day.

To get yourself to stop procrastinating, you need to put your money where your mouth is and practice what you preach, so be sure to follow whatever policies you enact, too.

Set deadlines and hold staff accountable

Lastly, establish clear deadlines for every new project you roll out while ensuring everyone is on the same page and has adequate support before getting started.

That's one of the most reliable ways to ensure everyone stays on-task and will be able to ask questions if they get lost. For large projects, it's usually smart to set smaller deadlines for individual parts along the way. Having smaller goals and benchmarks makes the work seem less daunting and employees less likely to put it off.

There should also be accountability in place so that bad habits don't start creeping back in. Remember to hold yourself accountable for any procrastination you exhibit as well, as that will show your employees that you don't consider yourself above the law.

Concluding thoughts: Procrastination at work

Procrastination is a problem that we all face from time to time, and it's an issue that's more prevalent and complex than most people think.

While the mainstream conception is that procrastination is always due to laziness or not caring, the opposite is usually the case.

When people care too much about their work, it can cause them to panic and put it off due to fear of failure or making a mistake. Conversely, sometimes people procrastinate due to physical exhaustion or a medical condition that holds them back, such as back pain or migraines.

With adequately structured positions, smart hiring, and a system in place to reduce procrastination, putting off work will be the least of your worries.