



# Conquer Procrastination

Sometimes it's a matter of how you set deadlines.

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**P**rocrastination is a prime cause of inefficiency and poor quality in a business. Samuel Clemens famously expressed that “The secret to success is getting started,” but isn’t there always a good reason for putting things off? If Clemens was correct and doctors and their staffs follow their natural tendency to procrastinate, there will be a negative impact on the level of success in medical practices. This is especially true for projects undertaken by group practices where, if only one individual falls prey to this tendency, s/he can negatively impact the success of an entire group’s project. Reducing this natural tendency to procrastinate is especially important in today’s changing healthcare environment—one which requires rapid responses to frequent change.

As students, most of us had the experience of putting off an assignment—creating a last minute rush to get things done. If, due to procrastination, we turned in an assignment late or did not have the time to give it our best effort, we suffered the consequence of a lower grade. In spite of having experienced such negative consequences, many of us, to this day, have retained this tendency to procrastinate. We now have even more excuses for putting things off than we did as students. We have family responsibilities, and in addition, we run busy practices. Significantly, we now depend on others too for our success. Associates, advisors, and support staff all help us get work done. Our success in practice is exponentially impacted because in addition to our own tendencies to procrastinate, we are held back by this same tenden-

cy in those working alongside us.

Successful entrepreneurs recognize that their success depends on these others. Blake Snow, an author, speaker, and trainer for Fortune 500 companies, stated in the April, 2019, *Costco Connection*, “As hard as it sometimes is for the more controlling among us to admit, humans are social creatures and must rely on each other to thrive. To succeed in business, you need other people to compensate for your personal shortcomings.” Unfortunately, the shortcomings of others are often the same

tire project, the second was given a series of interim deadlines for completing portions of the project, and the third was allowed to choose their own deadline. Participants were told they would receive ten cents for each error they found and would be penalized one dollar for each day of missed deadlines. Upon examination of this study’s results, it is evident that procrastination—or lack of it—can play a key role in a group’s level of success.

The results of this study revealed dramatic differences among the three groups—both in project comple-

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as ours and, compounding those of our own, can dramatically slow attainment of our desired outcomes.

Management of the human instinct to procrastinate can produce a dramatic difference in the economics and quality of a practice. A study conducted by Dan Ariely of MIT’s Sloan School of Management and Klaus Wertenbroch of Insead Graduate Business School in Fontainebleau, France provides some insight into how we might better manage this inclination. They found that the way we set deadlines has much to do with success in achieving our goals in a timely manner. These researchers conducted a series of experiments in 2002 in which 60 students were “hired” to proof-read three complex passages. The first group was assigned a single deadline of three weeks to complete the en-

tion time and in quality of the work done. The first group (assigned a single deadline) performed the worst in both areas. Their work, on average, was completed twelve days late, and they found only 70 errors. The second group (given a series of interim deadlines) performed the best. Their work, on average, was 0.5 days late—the closet of all three to being “on time”—and they detected 136 errors. The performance of the third group (setting its own deadlines) fell in the middle of the three. This group averaged 6.5 late days and found 104 errors. Profit was not mentioned in the study, but doing the math, we can compare financial outcomes. Members of Group One lost \$5.00 (earning \$7.00 in revenue for finding 70 errors and losing \$12.00 in “fines” for being 12 days

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late), members of Group Two produced \$12.60 in profit (earning \$13.60 in revenue and losing \$1.00 in fines), and those in Group Three received \$3.90 in

this study and the real world. There are thousands of medical practices outperforming the average practice in the level of profit they achieve by 67%, and many are doing much better. A consistency that I see in

as, “I need this work completed by the end of the month,” re-think your strategy and, instead, set several interim deadlines. This will provide greater assurance that the project’s ultimate end goal will be met—and, in a timely fashion. There are too many important goals that should not be “put off”—ones that must be met quickly, leaving little room for procrastination. Implementation of this one simple strategy can help you to achieve consistent results that add up over the long-term and deliver your ultimate objectives. **PM**

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profit (earning \$10.40 in revenue and losing \$6.50 in fines). In business terms, group one is out of business, and group three was outperformed by group two by 67%. This study demonstrates that breaking a long-term task into a series of short-range segments can alleviate some of the disadvantages associated with procrastination.

From my experience, I see strong parallels between the findings of

practices that achieve high levels of profit is that their doctors make decisions which are implemented with minimal procrastination. It is clear from the above study that setting interim deadlines for yourself, your staff, and associates will be a superior approach to having single deadlines or self-determined ones. The next time you find yourself setting a single, long-term deadline, such



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