

THE DARK SIDE: 'UNCOMFORTABLE' MOTIVATIONAL TASK CHARACTERISTICS AFFECTING PROCRASTINATION

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ABSTRACT

There clearly exist behavioral impediments to starting and completing tasks, both for students (Ackerman and Gross 2005) and for faculty (Ackerman and Gross 2006). Ackerman and Gross (2005) found that, for students, task factors such as interest, rewards, clarity of instructions, and interdependence of needing to complete one part of an assignment before starting another all influenced whether they procrastinated.

In this special session, we explore motivational characteristics of assignments that evoke discomfort and therefore are expected to affect procrastination. We suggest that this discomfort often leads to delay, but sometimes it may actually elicit a quicker response in starting. We identify several types of motivational task characteristics that may affect procrastination.

First, and probably most important, is the degree of change a task would bring into a person's life. Change is difficult. We rely on habit and well-rehearsed scripts to get us efficiently through most of the tasks we perform on a daily basis. Such routine is necessary because thinking through simple tasks (e.g., brushing one's teeth, preparing breakfast) each time they are to be done would take far too much time and energy. Making a change in the way one routinely does something is uncomfortable, and so may be procrastinated.

In an educational context, instructors might want to influence and change their marketing students' study routines, styles of writing, and ways of approaching assignments for purposes of enhancing learning. For the student, however, such departures from practiced routines and patterns may engender procrastination and poor performance. If, for example, students are used to quietly sitting in class and listening, they may procrastinate or even not do at all assignments that require them to raise questions and actively participate in discussion.

A second factor is familiarity with the task. Students are likely to procrastinate tasks requiring unfamiliar activity. Unfamiliar tasks require learning, which in turn requires time and effort. For example, depth

interviewing may be a research technique quite different and unfamiliar to many students. Marketing students are generally more familiar, and thus more comfortable, with research involving closed-ended survey questions. If students feel uncomfortable conducting lengthy interviews, their first reaction may be to want to slip back into conducting survey-type research. A common reaction is to put off the assignment until the last minute and then rely too much on familiar research techniques.

A third factor, perceived risk, may also be a major task variable influencing procrastination. Perceived risk associated with a task can lead to delay. This risk may be monetary. For example, students often delay purchasing expensive textbooks, and may postpone registering for classes, especially if the expense of tuition is theirs rather than parents' to pay. Perhaps conducting expensive mail surveys required for a research assignment may be delayed for this reason as well. Perceived risk also can be psychological. A student will likely procrastinate a task that s/he dreads or simply hates to do, such as reading class material anticipated to be difficult or boring, or writing the first draft of a paper. Similarly, fear of failure can be a potent psychological barrier to beginning a task or assignment. The perceived risk may also be social. If an assignment is perceived as embarrassing or there is a norm that 'no one does it,' then students will likely procrastinate. Lastly, though not common in marketing, students may procrastinate starting an assignment if there is perceived physical risk to doing it.

Perceived risk associated with inaction may also influence procrastination. Students may start an assignment earlier if they perceive risks in delaying it. Ackerman and Gross (2005) found that fear, rather than leading to paralysis, decreased the time between when an instructor gave an assignment and when students started it. The fear measured in the study was a general emotion regarding the task, but several types of perceived risk could have elicited it. For example, norms among student team members may affect individual student behavior regarding team assignments through perceived social risk of inaction. Students who procrastinate in a group assignment

where the norm is to complete work on time may face ostracism or worse. Similarly, if the perceived risk to grades or the psychological risk of being forced to complete work at the last minute can be made more salient, students may be less likely to procrastinate in starting assignments.

If students are working outside their comfort zones on assignments, they are more likely to procrastinate. We propose that the above three factors – the degree of change, familiarity with the task, and perceived risk – can elicit a degree of discomfort that affects student motivation and thus procrastination. Given the research findings in Ackerman and Gross (2005), we as instructors can structure assignments so as to help students to start and complete work on time.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, David S., and Barbara L. Gross. 2005. My instructor made me do it: Task characteristics of procrastination. *Journal of Marketing Education* 27 (April): 5-13.
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