

**I CAN START THAT MEA PAPER NEXT WEEK, CAN'T I?
THE TASK CHARACTERISTICS BEHIND WHY FACULTY PROCRASTINATE**

David S. Ackerman, California State University Northridge, Department of Marketing, College of Business and Economics, Northridge, CA 91330-8377; (818) 677-4628

Barbara L. Gross, California State University Northridge, Department of Marketing, College of Business and Economics, Northridge, CA 91330-8377; (818) 677-4634

ABSTRACT

Many works on faculty career development, and particularly those offering advice to new tenure-track faculty members, warn of the perils of procrastinating research and writing (e.g., Lucas and Murry 2002; Boice 2000). The authors of such books caution that because research and writing projects rarely impose immediate deadlines, they are too easily postponed. Even the requirement to produce a certain number of publications prior to promotion or tenure is typically associated with a deadline that is years in advance. For example, a tenure-track faculty member may view the three, four, or five years preceding his or her tenure decision as far in the future, and feel complacent about the need to work on research at any given point in time.

It is tempting to put off work with no specific due date when, for example, lesson plans must be prepared, exam questions must be written, or a stack of papers is waiting to be graded. This is particularly true when the faculty member encounters other obstacles such as writer's block, or feels uncertain how to proceed to solve a particular research problem. Thus, it is common to procrastinate important work with a more distant or ambiguous deadline in favor of what may be seen as more urgently required work with a set due date.

Little research has examined the characteristics of the tasks or activities most likely to be procrastinated, or how task characteristics can be modified to reduce procrastination. A number of studies have found that tasks perceived to be difficult, unpleasant, boring, or otherwise generally aversive are most likely to be procrastinated. In the marketing education literature, however, Paden and Stell (1997) identified several task characteristics expected to influence the likelihood of student procrastination on academic assignments. Ackerman and Gross (2005) operationalized these task characteristics and measured their effects on student procrastination. We suggest in this paper that, like student academic assignments, the types of projects and tasks undertaken by faculty members lend themselves to being procrastinated.

In completing the survey, respondents were asked to recall an important project they had recently completed. This allowed us to measure procrastination on real projects or tasks. With the recalled project in mind, each respondent was then asked questions to measure procrastination and ten task-related variables expected to affect the amount of procrastination (Ackerman and Gross 2005; Paden and Stell 1997). The effects of task characteristics are measured on both procrastination of starting and completing a project (Strongman and Burt 2000).

The results show several factors associated with task importance to influence procrastination. Fear or worry about the project, and pressures from competing deadlines, were both associated with more delay. Norms and rewards associated with starting early were found in the study to have the intended effect of reducing procrastination. Interest was a key factor for reducing procrastination. In general, task difficulty factors did not have as much influence on procrastination.

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