

I put off tasks – and I love it

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A year and a bit ago *Helsingin Sanomat* started paying more active attention to students' lives. The newspaper assigned one of its journalists to write reports about universities. In order to find out what is important, the journalist who 'infiltrated' the university also asked students from time to time about the kinds of topics they should write about.

Unexpectedly, the journalist learned that we should talk much more about procrastination. Students said that this was a very important issue because it seems to concern 'everyone' today. Procrastination means that you postpone doing a task, even if you know that you are making problems for yourself. Students had begun to suffer from it because procrastination, especially when it comes to study assignments, seemed to have many negative consequences, including fatigue and even anxiety.

This newspaper article about the harmful nature of procrastination caught my eye because I identified myself as one of its target group. I have always been a slowcoach. In my life, procrastination has been associated with work, in particular, with the difference that I had never considered this characteristic of mine a particular problem. Now that I really stopped to think about it, I gradually realised that I had actually honed my working methods in a direction where the crucial moves of any work in progress – often the greatest part of the job at hand – was performed very close to the deadline.

I admit it. This may sound weird. I also admit that few people would accept that this tendency would be ideal in working life. In any case, postponing things is not one of the best qualities in a team player; if there is even a single person in the team who leaves things to the very last minute, this is guaranteed to put its mark both on the team's mood and the progress of the work. Larger projects, in particular, cannot be managed successfully if the team contains even one last-minute person.

Before I go on, we should talk about why procrastination appears to have gained the proportions of a special problem right now. Scientists argue that one of the explanations for procrastination lies in the brain. The brains of modern humans have started to prefer tasks that provide instant gratification, whereas modern humans tend to avoid tasks where the potential dopamine surge is far in the future. The mechanics is basically the same as in different dependencies. When you reach a new level in a

video or computer game or see a thumbs-up on your screen on Instagram, your brain gets an instant reward. If we compare social media likes to studying for an exam or some other assignment that seems endlessly boring, there is no two questions about which one our brains will prefer.

Another explanation offered by scientists relates to the observation that modern humans who rush around constantly – due to changes in the way we live – are losing the noble skill of being idle. Statistics show that very few of us adults can come to terms with jobs that we have not done. We can imitate idling, as it were, but for how long can we manage it? Is it not precisely when we are idle that the jobs we have not done are the most likely to be topmost in our minds?

Scientists comfort us by saying that procrastination is not an illness, however, and in fact not even a disorder; it is mainly a chronic unpleasant tendency in our modern multi-performing lifestyles that we should just be aware of and learn to live with somehow. At the moment, it very much looks like it is not about to disappear from our lives – at least not over the next few millennia. On the contrary, it will increasingly colour our daily lives in a great variety of situations.

But I want to tell you about the exciting things I discovered when running some searches related to this topic. Is it really true that procrastination is such a bad thing? At first it appeared that this was indeed the case. The rest of the world thought along the same lines, too. Procrastination also caused anxiety on the other side of the Atlantic. Among other things, I found a YouTube video uploaded a few years ago, which offered concrete tips for learning not to procrastinate. This video had attracted around one million views. Then I found more similar videos, lots of them. They were mainly well made, to the point and appealing, and their aim was always the same: to shed the destructive habit of postponing work.

I then tweaked the settings of my Google search slightly. Surely it was odd that no one had found any justification for my view of procrastination being, at least in some cases, downright useful and if nothing else, liberating? A-hah, I did find such views, too. After staring for a while at the links that popped up on my screen, I found something that definitely relieved my anxiety: a reference to a work written a few years ago by Adam Grant, a Professor of Management at Wharton University, titled *Originals. How Non-Conformists Move the World*.

It turned out that Grant's idea had been to drill down through the lives of entrepreneurs and 'creative pioneers' who had achieved great things in their lives and to consider what they are doing differently from us ordinary people. Could we learn something from them, and if so, what, Grant asked.

Surprise, surprise. One of the observations that came up and was in fact common, was exactly the one I had found so liberating: a different approach to deadlines! It was also easy to guess that Professor Adam Grant was of the same persuasion himself. Postponing things until the ultimate deadline draws near is not as reprehensible as many people think. On the contrary. In fact, it has been a very effective tool for a few well-known people who have achieved a great deal in their lives.

Our basic problem is that modern humans categorise procrastination too strictly, Grant starts his arguments. We associate procrastination with spinelessness, laziness and a low level of alertness, or sometimes actual apathy. However, if we reach far enough back in humankind's cultural history, we will find another, downright practical dimension to procrastination. In ancient Egypt, for example, people could simply define it as 'waiting for the right time'. It was a natural part of living and getting on with everyday matters.

It was this very idea of 'waiting for the right time' for which Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, became known in his time. As many people remember hearing, Jobs was also known for his interest in literature – perhaps he had picked up the Egyptian idea in some historical work that described the era of the Pharaohs. Who knows.

All the same, Jobs justified his tendency to postpone things to people close to him by saying that he had a very strong motivation to solve problems. However, rather than wanting to spoil a good idea by rushing, he allowed it to mature over time. And when the solution eventually was there, many people could later rub their eyes and note that Jobs had certainly not picked the most predictable ideas.

And now we come to the moral of the story: the time that Steve Jobs seemed to spend procrastinating was by no means fruitless. To an outsider, it may well have seemed that he was idling, but in reality the mind of this consummate brainstormer was active at all levels – despite the fact that he hardly was aware of it himself.

I am extremely pleased that you can also find studies today that concur with both Grant's and Jobs' views. They support the idea that procrastination is not always such a black-and-white issue as we are often given to understand. I do admit that procrastination may be a problem in terms of quantity, but in terms of creativity, or achievements of an unexpected nature, it can be an actual virtue.

According to researchers who are in favour of procrastination, we have a strong tendency to stop thinking about a task or problem once we have finished with it. If, on the other hand, we have not completed or even started it, this usually ensures that our mind is revolving around it more or less

actively as a sort of background process. Researchers even have a name for this: they refer to strategic procrastination.

At this point, I was more enthusiastic than ever. I had done something smart without even knowing it. Not just put things off but procrastinated strategically! While procrastinating strategically, I have observed that you can simply do some tasks better when you have mulled over them for a while. I have also noticed that under pressure, you can find an extra gear, some kind of mysterious boost.

Procrastination may also be worthwhile for other reasons: if you do everything at once, you may end up doing a lot of unnecessary work. If you are uncertain, you may at least do it to an excessively high standard. People have also often been seen to rush to complete a task, and it is actually a point of honour for some to be the first to finish. But what may happen later is that the party who ordered the work – whoever or whatever it was - says: "Sorry, things have changed. We no longer need the thing we talked about last week."

But I also understand quite well that such strategic procrastination requires a very specific nature. It is obviously not for everyone.