Self-Imposed Deadlines Don't Stop Procrastination. Here's What Might.

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Mark Twain advised people never to put off until tomorrow what they can put off until the day after, and a lot of us listen. Estimates suggest that 15% to 20% of all people are chronic procrastinators, and that share goes up for situational delay: As one example, four in five people put off retirement savings despite knowing better. Then there are the innumerable office procrastinators, many identifiable by the mere fact that they're reading this article.

The devious thing about procrastination is that while we tend to shrug or laugh it off as part of the work process, evidence suggests it's far from harmless. At the root of the problem is our failure to differentiate between simply delaying a task, perhaps a healthy sign of organizational skills, and truly procrastinating on it, a self-defeating habit people know will hurt them later–a little like smoking. Not only does our work suffer from the real thing, but our well-being does, too.

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Some early research found that imposing a deadline might at least be better than waiting until the last minute. In a 2002 study, researchers Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch hired 60 students to proofread three passages. Some of these test participants received a weekly deadline for each passage, some received one final deadline for all three, and some could choose their own deadline. The readers got a dime for every error they detected but were docked a dollar for every day they were late.

Despite the penalty, participants who imposed their own deadlines performed worse than those given evenly spaced weekly deadlines in terms of detecting errors, finishing near deadline, and generating money (see below). Then again they did better than those given one final deadline. Ariely and Wertenbroch concluded in the journal *Psychological Science* that self-imposed deadlines, while a reasonable strategy to curb procrastination, "were not always as effective as some external deadlines in boosting task performance."

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