

PROCRASTINATION break the habit

Many business owners say the end of the day comes surprisingly fast—so fast that they can give some projects only the sketchiest treatment and others no treatment at all. But, aside from bemoaning the rapid movement of the clock's hands, what can they do about it? There's rarely a minute when the phone doesn't ring, an employee doesn't rush in with a question, a crisis doesn't demand intervention, or a routine activity doesn't push toward a deadline.

If this describes your response to the too-short day, you know it's not productive—that tomorrow's demands will be no lighter than today's. You know that projects, problems and plans neglected today probably won't be approached, much less disposed of, tomorrow or the day after.

It's unlikely that those jobs will be completed to your satisfaction without your deliberate effort to break the cycle of procrastination. For procrastination is the problem, not lack of time. Time is manageable. You can fit in every activity you're determined to perform. The tendency to procrastinate is harder to deal with, but it can be overcome once you recognize it as the culprit and stop blaming time. Use these ways to break the procrastination habit and get more done every day.

1. Keep Your Main Objectives in Mind. What's your overall goal—the single most important target you're aiming at? Write it down. Then list subsidiary goals which are related to, and will lead to, the main objective. Keep the list in front of you, post it on the wall or center it on your desk. Use it to guide your daily performance. Measure each task against this list. Discard or delegate tasks that don't relate to it.

2. Plan Each Day's Work. Every evening, plan your activities for the following day. Write down everything you must, or hope to accomplish. Include things others have asked you to do. Then set priorities. What's the most important item on the list? The second, third and so on? Rank each task in terms of its importance to your objectives.

3. Take Notes to Help Plan Activity. If you forget a major item when you plan the

day's tasks, it can knock out your whole schedule. Don't rely on memory: Get into the habit of making notes whenever anything requiring your action is mentioned. Glance at your notes each evening before you prepare your list of activities and you'll include every important item. You then can approach your list each morning confident that it's complete and accurate.

4. Take Some Small Actions. Suppose the project over which you're procrastinating is not only complex, but also unstructured: To try to win back some former customers, for instance. Begin by making a few small moves. Go through your back files, pulling out folders on your best prospects. Deposit the folders in a prominent spot in your office, and start reading through them, a few each day, making notes as you go along. List the information you'll need—current address, phone number, nature of past orders and past problems.

Organize your facts and start considering approaches. For example, how can you assure an old customer that you'll no longer have difficulty in developing your goods or services on or before the promised date? Now, actively engaged in the project.

5. Adapt Your Plans to Your Individual Time Clock. Are you a morning or an evening person? Many psychologists believe most people are divided into two types—those who jump out of bed in the morning ready to get going, and who do their best work before noon; and those who move slowly at first, building momentum as the day wears on. Whether or not you fit precisely into either of these patterns, chances are you have some hours which are more productive than others, times when you do your best work.

Use your knowledge of your individual time clock to schedule your day. Assign the most demanding tasks to your hours of peak efficiency.

6. Set Deadlines. Estimate how long it will take you to accomplish each task on your list. Be realistic. If you're interrupted continuously throughout the day, add that factor to your timetable. But be firm. If your experience tells you that a job should take 90

minutes, don't allow it to run for 120.

For tasks likely to extend beyond a couple of hours, establish intermediate deadlines: How much you should do every 30 minutes. Check your progress at these intervals. Move faster if you're not keeping up. Sometimes, of course, an unexpected problem will require you to adjust the deadlines. But usually you'll be able to meet them if you take them seriously.

7. Get Started Quickly. As soon as you reach your office, start to work on a planned task. Don't wait for inspiration, that often comes only after you're immersed in a project. If you're a slow starter, do a warmup task first, a simple under-10-minute job. Then turn immediately to the most important item on your list. Momentum you've built by doing the warmup will help you swing into your major assignment.

8. Find a Starting Point. Some problems appear hazy. You can't see at once where and how to begin. If a couple of minutes of concentration don't clear the haze, write down the problem along with its main elements. Then search for a pattern. Is it similar to other problems you've handled? Can you call someone for information to get you started? Would a book on your shelves or material in your files prove useful? Putting your problem on paper and getting some general information on the subject will often dispel your initial difficulty.

9. Make Your Decision and Act on It. Indecision is a major time-waster. Many decisions over which hesitant people agonize are small ones, worth neither the time nor effort. Don't get caught in this trap. Keep in mind that you don't have to be right all the time. Mistakes are rarely fatal or permanent. A wrong decision can usually be corrected and is often preferable to no decision at all. When you face a decision, therefore, look at these facts, apply your best judgement, and move on to the next project.

10. Let Priority, Not Time, Guide You. If you complete a job 15 minutes before your next appointment, you may wonder whether it pays to begin another major task. Should you disregard your list and use the time to dispose of a minute item or two?

Departing from your stated priorities that way is a mistake. At the end of the day, you'll

find you've finished half a dozen short, unimportant tasks, but left two major ones untouched. Don't let time dictate the sequence you follow. Instead, stick to your priorities and complete the tasks with most bearing on your main objectives before you turn to lesser matters. Fifteen minutes put into an hour-long task represents one-quarter of the time required.

11. Break Down Big Jobs. To make a big project manageable, reduce it to its components. Say the task is to reorganize your office for greater efficiency—moving filing cabinets, partitions, desks. You may find its magnitude overwhelming and put it off indefinitely. But if your present set-up hampers efficiency, delay will be costly.

12. Make Specific Plans. Have you been postponing a complex job which only you can do—for example a much needed realignment of sales territories? To get going, turn your attention to drawing up detailed plans. Look at the maps, make notes and start inking in new lines, cutting or enlarging territories to fit your current needs.

13. Remind Yourself of the Pay-Off. A task you dislike doing and can't delegate should be disposed of quickly so you can forget about it and turn to more interesting projects. To motivate yourself, consider its importance. What do you, your company, your customer's gain from it? How does it help you achieve your main objective? What would happen if it weren't done?

14. Appraise the Value of Your Time. Get out your calculator and estimate the cost of your time by the day, hour, minute. You'll find that even a few wasted minutes translates into lost dollars. Can you afford this waste? The simple act of putting a dollar value on your time may be more effective than anything else to help you become a self-starter and permanently break your procrastination habit.