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Overcoming Procrastination: Some Tips

In our September article, we discussed procrastination and suggestions for improving time management based on priorities and values. For our October article, it seemed natural to deal with procrastination, another time management issue.

Procrastination is succinctly defined as putting off until tomorrow what can be done today. It is often wrongly associated with laziness and idleness. In fact, procrastination is an adaptive response that leads us to avoid doing our work when it arouses negative emotions.¹ There are several causes behind the phenomenon of procrastination. Here are a few of them:

- Perfectionism;
- Work overload;
- Lack of resources to accomplish the task;
- Difficulty organizing one's time or prioritizing tasks;
- Relationship difficulties with a client.

Since January 2019, more than 150 cases handled by the Insurance Fund have been linked to failure to meet deadlines,² one of the possible causes of which is procrastination. In the light of the foregoing, it is helpful to consider each of the above-mentioned causes and suggest ways to find an anti-procrastination solution. This leads us to make a preliminary remark: If you want to effectively tackle your tendency to procrastinate, you need to target the cause or causes in order to choose the strategy that best suits you.

Perfectionism

In an interview with *La Presse*, psychologist Nicolas Chevrier mentioned that procrastinators are in fact perfectionists. Moreover, they are chronically dissatisfied persons whose expectations are too high, leading them to become discouraged.³ For example, lawyers who fall into this category have the idea that they should write a brief or pleading in a single draft with perfectly formed arguments. It goes without saying that this is a great deal of pressure to put on oneself, which can cause a lawyer to delay completion of a task.

¹ Roach, A. (2019). Procrastination : Comment arrêter de remettre au lendemain. *Oberlo*. Found at: <https://fr.oberlo.ca/blog/procrastination>; Gallo, A. (2011). Stop Procrastinating... Now. *Harvard Business Review*. Found at: <https://hbr.org/2011/10/stop-procrastinatingnow>

² For the period from January 1, 2019 to July 31, 2020.

³ Crystal, D. (2018). When Procrastination Rears Its Ugly Head. Washington State Bar Association. Found at: <https://www.wsba.org/Resources-and-Services/Lawyers-Assistance-Program/Self-Care/Procrastination-Article>; Roach, A. (2019). Procrastination : Comment arrêter de remettre au lendemain. *Oberlo*. Found at: <https://fr.oberlo.ca/blog/procrastination>

Moreover, some of us have a strong belief that successful lawyers set ambitious goals for themselves. However, according to psychologist Dan Crystal, this is not entirely accurate. Mr. Crystal notes that many successful lawyers take their bold goals and break them down into realistic and achievable objectives so that they feel a sustained sense of effectiveness.⁴ In concrete terms, this means breaking down what seems like a gigantic task into several small tasks. At the end of each of these little tasks, reward yourself.⁵

Work overload

On the one hand, work overload may be due to the fact that the lawyer has accepted too many mandates with tight deadlines. As a result, the lawyer postpones files that, although important, have a longer time frame. On the other hand, some lawyers say they "work better under pressure" so that they avoid tackling a task before the deadline. However, in such a situation, tasks are likely to accumulate. Moreover, what happens if something unforeseen happens or if the task proves more difficult than anticipated? Working under pressure is not completely risk-free, especially since it increases stress as well as the risk of errors. If you recognize yourself in the image of the lawyer jumping from one emergency to another, ask for help. It may be a good idea to delegate some of the work to be done on a file or to hire another lawyer even on a temporary basis. In addition, when committing to a mandate, set a realistic timeframe and manage your clients' expectations, particularly with respect to deadlines. Lastly, learn to say "no" to mandates you do not have the time to handle.

Lack of resources to accomplish the task

Procrastination can also occur when lawyers lack the knowledge, skill or information to take on the task, hence the importance of being well prepared for the job. At the start of your mandate, make sure you have a good understanding of the file, its issues and what is expected of you. If in doubt, ask your client or the person who gave you the work. Do not hesitate to reformulate certain aspects to check that you have properly understood them. If you note that the case you are being asked to handle is outside your area of practice and that you do not have the knowledge to complete it, refuse the mandate.

During the course of the mandate, if you notice that you are missing information or documents, quickly inform your client or the person who gave you the work so that they can provide you with what you need. Similarly, quickly get the necessary clarifications if any aspect of the file seems unclear to you.

Lastly, the temptation to postpone a file can be great when we have difficulty determining the strategy to adopt. In this regard, the novelty and complexity of a file can sometimes paralyze us. In these circumstances, most of the time, talking with a colleague can break the impasse at which we find ourselves.

⁴ Crystal, D. (2018). When Procrastination Rears Its Ugly Head. Washington State Bar Association. Found at: <https://www.wsba.org/Resources-and-Services/Lawyers-Assistance-Program/Self-Care/Procrastination-Article>

⁵ Crystal, D. (2018). When Procrastination Rears Its Ugly Head. Washington State Bar Association. Found at: <https://www.wsba.org/Resources-and-Services/Lawyers-Assistance-Program/Self-Care/Procrastination-Article>; Maister, D. (2006). Done at Last! Thoughts on Procrastination, February 2, 2006. Found at: <https://davidmaister.com/done-at-last-thoughts-on-procrastination/>; Gallo, A. (2011). Stop Procrastinating... Now. *Harvard Business Review*. Found at: <https://hbr.org/2011/10/stop-procrastinatingnow>

Difficulty organizing one's time and prioritizing tasks

Procrastination is also likely to affect lawyers who have difficulty organizing their time and managing their priorities. In these circumstances, General Eisenhower's matrix, which we discussed in our previous month's article on procrastination, is an essential tool. Indeed, it allows lawyers to manage their activities on a weekly basis according to two criteria: their importance and urgency. In concrete terms, the matrix forms part of an agenda system that also contains your deadlines (prescription, forfeiture, procedural and others). Moreover, why not colour-code your tasks according to the four frames of the matrix?

In connection with the agenda system, avoid ignoring reminder dates. Take your files out and check them. Don't re-shelve a file as long as the work has not been done or a new reminder date has not been entered in your agenda. Setting deadlines helps get the job done.⁶ Regardless of the circumstances, we cannot overemphasize the importance of periodically reviewing all your files. For example, this could be at 60-day intervals or less depending on the mandate you have been given.

As part of your planning, our previous suggestion to break the work down into smaller tasks makes sense if you are discouraged by the size of a task. In the same spirit, you can also split the time spent on the same task. For example, instead of spending two hours writing a pleading, you might decide to spend four 30-minute periods on it. In that regard, the Pomodoro method may help you with this process. This method consists in structuring your working time in short intervals followed by breaks.⁷ Essentially, the steps that make up the Pomodoro technique are as follows:⁸

1. Make a list of the things you need to do during the day;
2. Set your timer for 25 minutes;
3. Work on your task until your timer alarm sounds. If ideas come to mind, don't get distracted. Write them down quickly and get back to your task. If you get interrupted, restart the timer for another 25 minutes;
4. At the end of your 25 minutes of work, take a 5-minute break;
5. Then get back to this task or the next one for a second 25-minute uninterrupted period;
6. Repeat this sequence up to a maximum of four consecutive 25-minute work periods. Then give yourself a break of between 15 and 30 minutes.

In short, the Pomodoro technique allows you to start a job that seems gargantuan to you by splitting it into smaller work periods. It also helps your concentration.

This leads us to suggest that you create an environment conducive to concentration.⁹ Thus, turn off the ringer on your phones and the notification alarm on your email inbox. Schedule fixed periods for returning calls and answering emails. Similarly, don't accumulate papers and files on your desk. Not only can a file left on the corner of your

⁶Gallo, A. (2011). Stop Procrastinating... Now. *Harvard Business Review*. Found at: <https://hbr.org/2011/10/stop-procrastinatingnow>; Audet, S. (2015). Mettre fin à la procrastination. <http://www.sophieaudet.ca/chronique/49-mettre-fin-a-la-procrastination.html>

⁷ *Les techniques de la méthode Pomodoro*. Found at <http://www.pomodoro-technique.fr/>; Pauline Leblanc (2016). *Être plus efficace en utilisant la technique Pomodoro*, Université de Sherbrooke. Found at: <https://www.usherbrooke.ca/etudiants/actualites/chroniques/soutien-apprentissage/soutien-apprentissage/article/30895/>

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Audet, S. (2015). Mettre fin à la procrastination. Found at: <http://www.sophieaudet.ca/chronique/49-mettre-fin-a-la-procrastination.html>; Rock, N. (2015). *Need something to read to avoid doing that other thing?* AvoidAclaim. Found at: <https://avoidaclaim.com/2015/need-something-to-read-to-avoid-doing-that-other-thing/>; Maister, D. (2006). Done at Last! Thoughts on Procrastination, February 2, 2006. Found at: <https://davidmaister.com/done-at-last-thoughts-on-procrastination/>; Lachaise, A. (2019). Procrastination : 5 astuces pour ne pas remettre à demain! Juritravail. Found at: <https://www.juritravail.com/Actualite/internet-travail/Id/263024>

desk or stacked on the floor be quickly forgotten, but also remember that the state of your office reflects the state of mind you are in.¹⁰ In fact, it is much more inviting to work on a clear desk than on one tiny corner.

Another trick is to involve those around you in your anti-procrastination efforts.¹¹ Indeed, making a commitment to someone or sharing one's goals helps to achieve them. The importance we place on what people think of us is an incentive to fulfil our commitments. Similarly, think of the impact of your procrastination on your colleagues: does it prevent them from accomplishing their own tasks? Does your tardiness cause them additional stress? Most of us want to be known as team players and colleagues who contribute to the success of our firm. Also, having a more global vision of the impact of our procrastination can give us the necessary impetus to reduce that procrastination.¹²

To conclude on time management, one final element should be mentioned. Our energy level fluctuates throughout the day and every individual has their own energy level. Rest assured, no person will maintain their utmost productivity and creativity all day long. Thus, use the periods of time when your energy is high to perform tasks that require sustained concentration and are more complex. As for easier tasks, postpone them to a time when you have less energy.¹³

Relationship difficulties with a client

One final cause for procrastination deserves our attention. A difficult relationship with a client can lead to procrastination. Moreover, subconsciously, it is unlikely that you will offer the best service to a person with whom you have a great deal of difficulty getting along. In view of the above, consider transferring the file to a member of your team. If this is not possible, put an end to the mandate and stop representing the client. It goes without saying that before doing this, you will have taken the necessary steps to preserve your client's rights and you will have reminded the client in writing of all deadlines.

In closing, the practice of law presents enough challenges without you having to worry about forgotten or missed deadlines. You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today (Abraham Lincoln).

¹⁰ Crystal, D. (2018). When Procrastination Rears Its Ugly Head. Washington State Bar Association. Found at: <https://www.wsba.org/Resources-and-Services/Lawyers-Assistance-Program/Self-Care/Procrastination-Article>

¹¹ Gallo, A. (2011). Stop Procrastinating... Now. *Harvard Business Review*. Found at: <https://hbr.org/2011/10/stop-procrastinatingnow>; Audet, S. (2015). Mettre fin à la procrastination. Found at: <http://www.sophieaudet.ca/chronique/49-mettre-fin-a-la-procrastination.html>; Roach, A. (2019). Procrastination : Comment arrêter de remettre au lendemain. *Oberlo*. Found at: <https://fr.oberlo.ca/blog/procrastination>

¹² Dicaire, G. (2018). Comment arrêter de procrastiner? Unique Coaching. Found at: <https://uniquecoaching.ca/comment-arreter-de-procrastiner/>

¹³ Audet, S. (2015). Mettre fin à la procrastination. Found at: <http://www.sophieaudet.ca/chronique/49-mettre-fin-a-la-procrastination.html>; Dicaire, G. (2018). Comment arrêter de procrastiner? Unique Coaching. Found at: <https://uniquecoaching.ca/comment-arreter-de-procrastiner/>; ; Rock, N. (2015). *Need something to read to avoid doing that other thing?* AvoidAclaim. Found at: <https://avoidaclaim.com/2015/need-something-to-read-to-avoid-doing-that-other-thing/>