

Improving project management: Deadlines as the solution to overconfidence in estimating time to complete a project

One characteristic of the cognitive problem of overconfidence is the tendency to underestimate how long it will take to complete a project. This overconfidence may be fueled in part by a phenomenon known as confirmation bias, the tendency to selectively retrieve and attend to information that is consistent with a preferred hypothesis (rather than searching for evidence that the hypothesis might be wrong). When estimating time to complete a project, people tend to prefer the hypothesis that the project is manageable, resources will be readily available, and no unexpected events will occur that will create obstacles to progress or otherwise delay project completion. Of course, resources are frequently more difficult to obtain than anticipated and various events (increased work load in other courses, changes in off-campus employment demands, family emergencies, illnesses, auto accidents, weather events, etc.) can produce delays that push back initial deadlines.

The solution to this problem is to create multiple deadlines (“milestone” deadlines) throughout the term for a large-scale project that is due at the end of the term. Although this strategy might strike some as “hand holding,” this suggestion is consistent with “real world” practices for managing procrastination. Wistrich (2008) examined the effect of procrastination and the problem of failing to meet deadlines associated with filing legal claims within the statute of limitation. Wistrich notes that imposing a deadline improves task completion. Setting long-term deadlines not only fails to improve task completion, allowing a long time for task completion makes the task resemble a task that has no specific deadline. Tasks with self-imposed deadlines or no clear deadline are least likely to be completed. Thus, short deadlines increase the likelihood that tasks will be completed on time and multiple, spaced deadlines for a large project are more likely to result in successful task completion than a single long-term deadline.

Buehler, R., Griffin, D., & Ross, M. (1994) Exploring the “planning fallacy”: Why people underestimate their task completion times. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 366-381.

Newby-Clark, I. R., Ross, M., Buehler, R., Koehler, D. J., & Griffin, D. (2000). People focus on optimistic scenarios and disregard pessimistic scenarios while predicting task completion times. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 6, 171-182.

Wistrich, A. J. (2008). Procrastination, deadlines, and statutes of limitations. *William and Mary Law Review*, 50, 607-666.

Tip submitted by:

Claudia J. Stanny, Ph.D., Director
Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment
University of West Florida
Pensacola, FL 32514
(850) 857-6355 or 473-7435
uwf.edu/cutla/