

Passive-Aggressive Procrastination

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Dawdling disguises fear

IF YOU TEND TO PUT THINGS OFF, YOU SHOULD READ THIS RIGHT NOW

By Jared Sandberg THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Paul Kedrosky claims to be among the world's worst procrastinators.

"I literally circle topics like a dog trying to tromp down a nice place to sleep," said the high-tech executive. "I try to figure out how to do something without, you know, doing it."

That means that Kedrosky, 39, sometimes has to play a game of chicken with a new assignment.

"I take this approach of trying to outlast the obligation," he said.

If and when that tactic fails, he can switch gears and become completely deadline driven. But that doesn't mean someone can arbitrarily assign him an early deadline and he'll fall for it.

"I want to know when the wheels are going to fall off," he said.

For Kedrosky, it's all part of "this nagging suspicion that a lot of the things that I get asked to do I don't actually have to do."

He's particularly wary, he said, because the advent of e-mail means that managers no longer have to look a worker in the eye when they give orders, allowing for the rise of what Kedrosky calls "drive-by obligations."

But don't try telling that to psychologists who have studied the practitioners of dallying. They, along with most of corporate America, seem pretty fed up with procrastinators' endless searches for the right moment to undertake tasks.

"The mis-perception of our culture is that it's OK to procrastinate," said Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University. "A bigger mis-perception," he adds, "is that it isn't a serious problem."

He said research indicates that 20 percent of adults identify themselves as chronic procrastinators.

It isn't that hard to spot the procrastinators. They fetch coffee that they don't drink. When given a deadline, they'll ask, "But what's the real drop-dead deadline?" They get a spurt of energy when they're under pressure, and they create mental to-do lists because they're not foolish enough to leave a paper trail to document their vice.

Jane Burka, a psychologist and co-author of the book *Procrastination*, said procrastinators aren't so much lollygaggers as they are people who fear failure, or success or being controlled. For example, she said, some people seek a ready-made excuse for not doing the job as well as it could have been done.

"It's a way of protecting yourself from having your true abilities evaluated," she said.

Other dawdlers worry that if they're successful, they'll be required to produce more, Burka said. Finally, procrastination in the workplace can be a way of saying, "You can't make me do it" without uttering those risky words.

"Procrastination by definition isn't the problem," Burka said. "It's whether it interferes with your productivity or self-esteem."

Cheryl Litwin, who seems to be a perfectly healthy procrastinator, said she didn't start to dawdle until her company started to require detailed reports on conferences, telephone calls and business visits, including data on who attended and how much lunch cost.

"I have started to procrastinate as a control thing," she said. And when the tasks don't disappear, she said, she just produces "the adrenaline I need to create and focus."

She even wondered whether procrastination mightn't be Mother Nature's version of Ritalin.

Diane Danielson, the executive director of the Downtown Women's Club in Bos-ton, said that "procrastination" is too strong a word to

describe her approach. "I call it 'going with the flow,'" said the single mother.

If, for example, she can't find something when she's packing for a business trip, she realizes the time has finally arrived to clean her closet.

"If I actually feel like cleaning a closet, it's very rare," she said, "so I better go with it."