



FUTURE TRENDS - BY ROGER GUDOBBA

Procrastination

“Never put off until tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow.”

~Mark Twain

I admit that I am a procrastinator. So, a recent article in the Wall Street Journal entitled, “How to Be a Better Procrastinator,” intrigued me. So, I decided to do a little research on procrastination. The author, Dr. John Perry, an emeritus professor of philosophy at Stanford University, is an admitted procrastinator himself. The article asks: “Why should I want to be a better procrastinator? Procrastinators are unproductive. No one should want to know how to be more unproductive, right?”

But are procrastinators truly unproductive? In most cases the exact opposite is true. They don’t have neat desks or even neat desktops. They spend a lot of time playing catch-up. But they are likely to be creative and on the whole amiable. The truth is that most procrastinators are structured procrastinators. This means that although they may be putting off something deemed important, their way of not doing the important thing is to do something else. Like reading instead of completing their expense report before it is due. Nevertheless, such people feel bad about being procrastinators.”

Structured procrastination, as the author suggests, means that you intentionally place items at the top of your list that aren’t actually all that important so that you end up getting all sorts of things done while avoiding the “important” tasks at the top of your list. This method sounds an awful lot like setting your alarm clock a half hour fast so that you can get to places on time, which seems to really do wonders for some people.

Stanford philosophy professor John Perry describes how he manages to be a productive procrastinator by structuring his to-do list to compensate for procrastination. “Procrastinators seldom do absolutely nothing; they do marginally useful things... because they are a way of not doing something more important. If all the procrastinator had left to do was to sharpen some pencils, no force on earth could get him to do it. However, the procrastinator can be motivated to do difficult, timely and important tasks, as long as these tasks are a way of not doing something more important. Structured procrastination means shaping the structure of the tasks one has to do in a way that exploits this fact.”

Still you may wonder if there is some way to become less of a procrastinator. Dr. Perry has a few ideas that may apply to your situation and be helpful. The first piece of advice is: don’t listen to most of the advice offered to procrastinators by people that don’t have this particular flaw.

For example, “Keep your commitments to a minimum, so you won’t be distracted.” If a procrastinator doesn’t want to work on something, it won’t help to have nothing else to do. It’s better to have lots of things to do, so you can work on some of them as a way of not doing the task that, for whatever reason, you seek to avoid.

Many procrastinators use to-do lists. And indeed they can be useful. But what exactly are to-do lists for?

The structured procrastinator will have in his mind, or perhaps written down somewhere, a priority list; the things he needs to do, at some time or other. The seemingly important tasks will be at the

Not doing one thing is often an excellent way of doing something else.

Leaving things until the last minute is a way of budgeting your time.

top, motivating him to do tasks further down the list as a way of procrastinating. So far so good! But it is also useful to have daily to-do lists. And here is where it is easy to be confused. One might think the purpose of such a list is to remind one what to do. And they can be useful in that way. But that is not their main purpose.

The main function of the daily to-do list is to give the procrastinator the experience of checking off tasks as they are finished. Putting a check in the box next to the item, or crossing it out with a flourish, gives one a little psychological lift. It helps us to think of ourselves as doers, accomplishers, and not just lazy slugs. It gives us psychological momentum. Thus the to-do list should be of a type where the task that has been completed remains on the list, with a check mark in a box to the side, or perhaps crossed out. (So computerized to-do lists in which the task simply disappears when you check it should be avoided at all costs.)

With a little tongue-in-cheek, Dr. Perry states: “I try to make up a to-do list before I go to bed, and leave it by the alarm clock. It starts like this:

1. Get out of bed
2. Turn off the alarm.
3. Don't hit the snooze button
4. Don't go back to bed.
5. Go downstairs.
6. Make Coffee

By the time I sit down with my first cup of coffee, I can check off six items. This feels good and looks impressive. My day of accomplishment is off to a flying start. I didn't need reminders to do any of these things. But I need a little pat on the back for doing them. The only likely way of getting that pat is by having a to-do list, so I can cross them off.”

There is an old adage, “Never put off until tomorrow what you

can do today.” This is quite absurd. Let's assume each day ends at midnight. As long as it isn't yet midnight, according to this adage, you should be working on something, even if you could just as well do it tomorrow. It also means you will never get to sleep before midnight, unless there is absolutely nothing you could be doing today rather than tomorrow. It really is silly advice. Better advice is, “Never do today any tasks that may disappear by tomorrow.” But if you are a structured procrastinator, you don't need that advice. You will comply with it automatically. It's like a fringe benefit.

Everyone procrastinates sometimes, but 20 percent of people chronically avoid difficult tasks and deliberately look for distractions—which, unfortunately, are increasingly available. Everything that is written attempts to define procrastination and tell you how to cure it. Strictly speaking, this is impossible. There are an infinite number of things you could be doing. No matter what you work on, you're not working on everything else. So the question is not how to avoid procrastination, but how to procrastinate well.

Procrastination encourages productive subconscious thought. When we put off doing something, our subconscious focuses on it, so then when we get around to doing it we are full of good ideas we wouldn't have had if we plunged right into. Any procrastinator will tell you that. So it must be true.

For more information on procrastination, I highly recommend Dr. Perry's book, ‘The Art of procrastination’ or visit his website; www.structuredprocrastination.com.

I have a coffee cup on my desk with this slogan “I'm not wasting time, I am a Structured Procrastinator.’ That I purchased from the website as a constant reminder that the best part about procrastination is that you are never bored, because you have all kinds of things that you should be doing.

We will talk about this some more in a future article. Remember, “If all else fails, do nothing. Life isn't all about productivity.” ❖

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