

## (Un) just in time

**By Stuart White**  
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I used to have a staff member who left everything till the last minute. It was infuriating to watch. Consistently tasks would be put off, work pushed aside with a laissez faire "I'll get to it later" attitude. And then right on cue at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour she'd kick into action, becoming busier than a room full of cuckoo clocks striking midnight. There was a whirlwind of activity; printers would be printing, admin staff would be running around like headless chickens responding to commands of 'do this', 'do that', documents would have to be urgently collated and bound, presentation packs made up, last minute documents scanned, people phoned, crises averted... that's extra overtime, frazzled nerves, cancelled appointments...the world put on hold for her and her project.

And then, at the end of it all, oblivious to the chaos caused,, she would proclaim a job well done and muse how she works so much better under pressure. Hmm. That's one theory. The other, as one motivational speaker used to say, would be "You don't feel that way because you do your BEST work at the last minute...it's because you do your ONLY work at the last minute'.

I interpret it as 'the nearer it gets to my deadline the more likely I am to get off my fat behind and do what needs to be done because I am too damn lazy to do it at other times' Some people are inveterate procrastinators, leaving everything so late they have no choice but to rush. Admittedly we work faster under pressure but is the work really better?

I myself am rarely satisfied with any of the work I do because when I review it when its complete I usually always find things that I could have improved and done better. Take these articles for example. The best examples I submit are not when my deadline is fast approaching and I get a jolt of panic-inspired inspiration, spit out 800 words and get it to the editor in the nick of time.

When I write an article and am able to come back to it in a few hours or even days later to proof-read , I turn better work in than when I scribble something down in desperation an hour before deadline. The longer I wait to edit my article the less I am involved in it. I can see mistakes clearer. I can catch those paragraphs where I am just running on and on with no point. You have time to mull over your approach and adjust it accordingly. When we work under pressure there is no time for real quality checking and reflection.

Consequently I don't like working with people who leave things to the last minute. If I know they need a looming deadline or someone breathing down their neck to get things done, I don't want to work with them. I won't use them in my projects and I won't recommend them to other people. Research indicates that many people who procrastinate frequently have lower quality in their school and work assignments and I hate seeing a job poorly done because you simply left it to the last minute, having wasted a week which could have been devoted to honing and perfecting it.

I don't want to discount working under pressure completely. There are those occasions when time is unavoidably tight and it gives a necessary impetus to the situation. One of the altruisms I ascribe to when completing any task is Parkinson's Law. This says that a task will swell to fill the time allowed to complete it. In other words if you give yourself an hour to do something, it will take an hour to do. If you give yourself 45 minutes to do the same task, it will take 45 minutes because you will focus on only the important aspects and remove unnecessary time fillers.

We see this in real-time life and death situations or do-or-die sporting contests – the paramedic working against the clock after a natural disaster such as the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan or the sporting hero able to handle pressure and not choke when the game is on the line. Now in your life, you may not be asked to save lives on a daily basis or to carry your team to a championship win but everyone experiences a situation when they must perform well under pressure.

And let's not ignore the flip side of this coin. Pressure, if not handled correctly, can be crushing. During a presentation it can make a person unable to communicate their ideas and thoughts correctly; resulting in a disastrous performance. And it's even tougher at the top. Anyone shouldering the responsibility of the top job is under the cosh 24-7 - I know of a CEO who received bad news the other day and immediately had to get in the car and drive to the private hospital as his blood pressure went through the roof. A clear case of 'if you can't handle the heat, stay away from the pressure cooker'.

So instead of patting yourself on the back next time you wing it and just make your deadline by the skin of your teeth, think how much better you could have done it with a bit more time and trouble. And at the risk of sounding clichéd, if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing properly – otherwise it's called cheating.

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