

September 1, 2020

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Pre-Crastination: Have You Heard of It?

Most of us are familiar with the term procrastination, putting off until tomorrow what can be done today. But are you familiar with the term pre-crastination?

Rosenbaum and his colleagues define pre-crastination as the tendency to complete or start a task as quickly as possible at the expense of additional physical effort.¹ For lawyers, who perform more intellectual tasks, pre-crastination is the rush to perform a given task as soon as it presents itself to the detriment of their health, the quality of the services rendered or other priority tasks.

Rosenbaum's team discovered the pre-crastination process through a series of studies, whose results were published in 2014.² As part of the studies, the researchers asked students to take buckets of water of a certain weight and located in different places along an alley and carry them to the end of the alley. The students were allowed to determine which bucket they were going to carry. In fact, the students were only instructed to do what they thought was easiest. Unexpectedly, the students chose the first bucket of water when the researchers expected them to take the farthest bucket and carry it a shorter distance. The conditions under which the experiment was carried out were modified on a few occasions to exclude a number of explanations for the students' behaviour. When asked why they made this choice, the majority of students indicated that they wanted to complete the task as quickly as possible. In short, the choice made by the students reflected a tendency to pre-crastinate at the expense of additional physical effort.

Manifestations of Pre-Crastination in the Practice of Law

Pre-crastination can manifest itself in several ways in the practice of law. Here are a few examples:

- Answering emails immediately, whereas in some situations, it would have been better to delay our response in order to provide clients with well-considered explanations or recommendations;
- When a senior lawyer comes into our office to give us a new, non-urgent file, immediately starting on that task to the detriment of drafting an opinion that must be sent within the next few hours;

¹ Rosenbaum, D.A., Gong, L. and Potts, C.A. (2014). Pre-Crastination: Hastening Subgoal Completion at the Expense of Extra Physical Effort. *Psychological Science*, 25(7), 1487-1496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614532657>

² *Id.*

- Interrupting an important conversation with a colleague or client to share an idea we don't want to forget.

The Causes of Pre-Crastination

Caution should be exercised regarding the causes of pre-crastination since research on the subject is in its infancy. That being said, some explanations come up more regularly than others to explain the phenomenon.

First, one of the explanations put forward is that pre-crastination is a remnant from our ancestors.³ There was a time when they lived by hunting and fishing, and if a deer came along, it was better to shoot it because the opportunity might not come again soon. Similarly, it made more sense to opt for simple and practical solutions than to put things off until later, hence the propensity to act quickly.

Other hypotheses regularly put forward include the relief our working memory. In other words, by performing the task immediately, we don't have to keep it in mind for future performance and we can cross it off our to-do list. Related to the above, the accomplishment of a task brings immediate gratification. By accomplishing several small tasks, we get satisfaction in the moment and feel productive.⁴

Moreover, pre-crastination could be a way to alleviate negative emotions related to our workload. For example, such an emotion may be anxiety related to the accumulation of tasks.⁵ By quickly addressing these tasks, we can just as quickly get rid of that anxiety.

In addition, it's a way of projecting a good image by demonstrating our productivity.⁶ In such a case, pre-crastination is linked to self-confidence.

Finally, pre-crastination occurs in people who confuse "doing it fast" with "doing it right".⁷

Repercussion In Our Practice

While in today's society, where people have to function at 100 miles an hour, pre-crastination may seem like an asset, it's not.

In an interview with *La Presse*, psychologist Nicolas Chevrier explained that pre-crastinators are perfectionists defined by others. They have the idea that people have high expectations of them and that they must immediately carry out any new task entrusted to them.⁸

The problem stems from the fact that these people tend to spread themselves thin and do several things at once. This results in higher levels of stress and fatigue and

³ Rosenbaum, D.A., Wasserman, E.A. (2015). Pre-Crastination: The Opposite of Procrastination. *Scientific American*. Found at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/pre-crastination-the-opposite-of-procrastination/>; Matthieu, Êtes-vous un précrastinateur? Ou comment faire tout de suite ce qui aurait pu ne pas être fait plus tard. Found at: <https://simplementdanslebonsens.com/2019/05/27/etes-vous-un-precrastinateur-precrastination-travail-tout-de-suite/>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Matthieu, *supra*, note 3.

⁶ Morin, I. (2016). La précrastination pour en finir au plus vite. *La Presse*. Found at: https://plus.lapresse.ca/screens/3c8d6186-4fc5-4f2b-9b3d-87773872c0c4__7C__0.html

⁷ Chalaux, A. (2015). La précrastination, cet autre trouble de l'organisation. *Psychologies*. Found at: <https://www.psychologies.com/Travail/Souffrance-au-travail/Stress-au-travail/Interviews/La-precrastination-cet-autre-trouble-de-l-organisation>

⁸ Morin, I., *supra*, note 6.

possibly burnout. In addition, these people have difficulty completing their work. Indeed, because they rush to do every new task, they do not necessarily complete the previous one. At the end of the day, when they look at their to-do list, they see that several trivial tasks have been accomplished, but that the work requiring sustained thinking has not been completed. In light of what was stated above, they experience a sense of inefficiency and dissatisfaction.⁹

In concrete terms, lawyers who pre-crastinate have difficulty meeting their deadlines. In addition, errors from inattention are likely to occur due to multitasking and pre-crastination fatigue. Thus, instead of resulting in a gain in productivity, pre-crastination wastes precious minutes because of the need to correct mistakes or get back to work.¹⁰ Moreover, because lawyers who pre-crastinate are quick to respond, they may not always have the necessary perspective, which leads them to suggest strategies or provide explanations that, upon reflection, are not optimal. It is therefore easy to see the impact of pre-crastination on lawyers' professional liability.

A Solution Please!

If you have discovered a tendency to pre-crastinate, rest assured, all is not lost! It goes without saying that pre-crastination raises issues with respect to time management. One way to mitigate the effects of pre-crastination is to organize and plan your activities according to their urgency and importance. In this regard, Harvard graduate Stephen R. Covey, the founder of FranklinCovey and the author of several best-selling books, sheds interesting light in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.¹¹

Mr. Covey explains that before even thinking about reorganizing your agenda, a prior step is essential: identifying your core values and goals. By determining your values and the objectives you are pursuing, you can establish the foundations for organizing your time in an efficient and satisfactory manner.

Once this first step has been completed, Covey suggests a tool based on the matrix of General Dwight David Eisenhower (34th President of the United States) to support the management of your time according to your priorities. The matrix consists of the following four quadrants:

⁹ Chalaux, A., *supra*, note 7.

¹⁰ Burkus, D. (2014). The Irresistible Allure of Pre-crastination. Harvard Business Review. Found at: <https://hbr.org/2014/08/the-irresistible-allure-of-pre-crastination>

¹¹ Covey, S.R. (2005). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Simon & Schuster.

	Urgent	Non-urgent
Important	I ACTIVITIES Crises Pressing issues Projects subject to a deadline	II ACTIVITIES Prevention, activities related to our production capacity Deepening relationships Searching for new opportunities Planning and relaxation
Not important	III ACTIVITIES Interruptions, telephone calls, mail and reports following certain meetings Various issues to be resolved quickly Various rewarding activities	IV ACTIVITIES Futile activities Mail Certain “time-wasting” phone calls Pleasant hobbies

Inspired by the Stephen R. Covey’s table

Briefly, what is urgent refers to the tasks that need to be done now. According to Mr. Covey, they drive us into action. He also mentions that the important tasks are linked to our results. For Mr. Covey, an important task contributes to the realization of our mission, to the defence of our values and priority objectives.¹² The central idea regarding the use of this table is to allow as much time as possible for the activities in quadrant two. Easier said than done, you say? Admittedly, the task is not easy. In fact, two major implications flow from the above. First, you will need to reduce the time spent on the activities in quadrants three and four. Doing so is only possible if you learn to assert yourself and say no to certain activities. Here are a few suggestions to help you in your efforts:

- Focus on weekly as opposed to daily planning. This gives you a global view and reduces the risk of your time being spent solely on day-to-day crisis management. This type of planning also allows you to be more realistic regarding your deadlines;

¹² *Id.*

- In your agenda, plan blocks of working hours dedicated to the completion of tasks related to each of the quadrants. It goes without saying that the time spent on activities in quadrant two should be proportionally greater than the time spent on activities in the other quadrants;
- Leave a “buffer” period between each activity. We often tend to underestimate the time required to complete each task. When our schedule is too tight, it adds unnecessary stress;
- Plan a time slot in your day to deal with unexpected events;
- Determine if certain activities can be delegated. In general, the activities in quadrant three lend themselves well to delegation;
- Adopt a healthy lifestyle. Also set aside some time in your schedule for rest and exercise that you enjoy. Eating well, getting enough sleep and exercising provide the necessary energy to face the days, which, let’s face it, are quite full;
- Turn off the ringer on your phones (office and cell phone) as well as the email notification alarm. This will allow you to avoid distractions while performing a task;
- Inform your colleagues of your time management efforts, while reassuring them of your flexibility. In particular, tell them that such planning can only be beneficial in terms of the quality of the work done;
- Similarly, manage your clients’ expectations regarding deadlines and ensure that these expectations are realistic. In this way, you will reduce your chances of being blamed for not meeting a deadline. Moreover, only accept a mandate if you have enough time to handle it;
- Lastly, assert yourself! This means saying no to activities that don’t suit you or for which you simply don’t have the time.

We conclude with a quote from author Louis Guilloux: [TRANSLATION] “It is certainly necessary not to waste time, but it is even more necessary to know how to take it.”