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Trouble starting a task? Perception of time may be the problem, study finds

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Completing tasks and crossing them off the ubiquitous "to-do" list is a great feeling. But what about those nagging tasks we keep putting off? What's the difference between those jobs that get completed and those that do not?

The answer may be our perception of time, according to new research by Yanping Tu, a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.

The study, "The Categorization of Time and Its Impact on Task Initiation," recently published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, finds that people are more likely to begin a job when, from a time perspective, it appears to be part of the present. On the other hand, they are less likely to start work on assignments that seem to be part of the future.

"The key step in getting things done is getting started. If you never get started, you can't possibly finish," Tu explains. "But that urgency, that need to actually work on a task, happens when that task is seen as part of a person's present."

Tu and her coauthor, Dilip Soman of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, conducted a series of studies to support their theory. For example, in one study, 100 undergraduates were told that they had five days in which to complete a four-hour data entry assignment. This assignment was made at the end of April, and those

who were assigned the task on April 24th or 25th and had to finish by the 29th or 30th were more likely to begin work than those who were assigned on the 28th and told they needed to finish in the first few days of May. The change in month provided a barrier to the students that made the task seem less like it was part of the present and more like it was part of the future.

"We have shown how goals are perceived in time is clearly linked to people's views of when and whether to begin work," Tu adds. "It would be interesting to look at how these temporal views affect other aspects of success, such persistence in completing jobs and the quality of a job done."

Provided by University of Chicago

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