Task Procrastination in Organizations: A Framework for Research

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Procrastination in organizations may have adverse effects on both individual well-being and system effectiveness, yet studies on this topic are sparse and theoretical development appears to be nonexistent. Procrastination is viewed here as the act of putting off a task that either the focal person or other role-senders expect should be done at the present time. Hence, the emphasis here is upon aspects of the work environment that give rise to procrastination rather than on habits and personality characteristics. Three categories of situational variables are proposed as predictors of task procrastination: characteristics of the task, the relationship between the focal task and other tasks, and attributes of the organization. Furthermore, task discretion is hypothesized to moderate the relationships between these sets of predictors and procrastination. The ways in which this framework may be useful for empirical research and as a starting point for subsequent theory generation are discussed. Finally, it is suggested that future research and theory-building should not focus exclusively upon the negative aspects of procrastination.

INTRODUCTION

There is reason to believe that procrastination is an important subject for empirical research. Tasks that are not completed promptly may reduce both individual performance and organizational effectiveness, and they may become a source of stress to those organization members who are expected to complete them. A variety of articles and books on procrastina-

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tion have appeared recently in the popular press, which suggests that there is a need for knowledge on this topic.[2] Interest in "procrastination workshops" also reflect this need for usable theory and research.

Despite this popular interest, little empirical research has been conducted on this topic. The research that does exist focuses almost exclusively on procrastination among college students,[3] although Hill, Hill, Chabot and Barrall (1978) did measure procrastination among college faculty members as well. Moreover, our review of the literature suggests that no effort has been made to develop a theoretical model for the prediction of procrastination at work. As a result, our purpose is to present a preliminary model of individual procrastination in organizational settings. This model is intended to help researchers identify a set of situational variables that may be important predictors of procrastination of a specific task.

Procrastination is defined here as the act of putting off a task that either the focal person or other role-senders expect should be done at the present time. Thus, the task is the unit of analysis here rather than the person, the job, or the role. Procrastination, or more precisely task procrastination, is not viewed as a generalized work habit or personality characteristic. Rather, it is a behavior that is tied to a specific task. Most existing writings on procrastination are popular articles that describe ways people can improve their work habits through time-management techniques. While such approaches are useful, we believe that attention should also be focused on aspects of the situation that prompt organization members to avoid the completion of certain tasks. Existing writings usually place all blame for procrastination on the person; our aim is to identify variables that may be outside of the person's control that cause task procrastination. Our concept of task procrastination is also distinct from work motivation. An individual with high internal work motivation and a challenging job may still procrastinate with respect to a specific task.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The model of task procrastination in organizational settings is presented in Fig. 1. We propose that three classes of situational variables may predict task procrastination in organizational settings: characteristics of the focal task, the relationship between the focal task and other tasks, and attributes of the organization.

[2]For example, see Burka & Yuen (1982), Horwitz (1981), and Bliss (1976).
[3]For example, see Hill, Hill, Chabot, and Barrall (1978), Nelson and Scott (1972), Morris, Surber, and Bijou (1978), and Ziesat, Rosenthal, and White (1978).
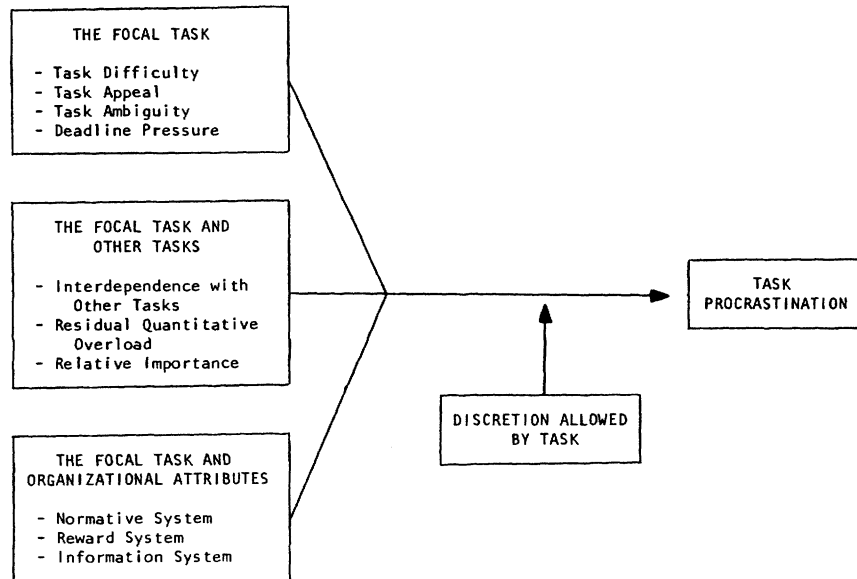
Fig. 1. Task procrastination in organizational settings.

The Focal Task

Difficulty, appeal, ambiguity, and deadline pressure are character-istics of a task that may help predict its procrastination. We propose that these four variables will influence task procrastination independently of personal characteristics.

Task difficulty is the degree to which a task is too hard to complete. This concept is derived from the concept of qualitative role overload (Katz & Kahn, 1978). A task may be difficult because a person lacks the skills and abilities to carry it out, because the appropriate technology is not available, or because resources are not available for completing the task. In any case, it is likely that the individual will put off those tasks that are difficult to complete because they may be associated with frustration and failure. It is also possible that the relationship between task difficulty and procrastination is curvilinear. People may tend to put off those tasks that are extremely easy and extremely difficult and focus on those tasks that have a moderate level of difficulty. This is consistent with research on need achievement that demonstrates a behavior is most likely to occur when there is a 50/50 chance of success (e.g., Atkinson, 1964; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953).

Task appeal is the extent that a task is interesting. In using the term "appeal" we do not refer to external rewards provided for completion of the task. Rather, we mean the extent that a task is *not* boring. Appealing tasks usually entail coming into contact with a variety of disparate stimuli, particularly novel stimuli. These characteristics are perhaps best understood by using the terminology of activation theory (Schwab & Cummings, 1976; Scott, 1966). An appealing task is one that provides stimuli of sufficient magnitude and variation and that affects many senses, such as vision, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Tasks that have these characteristics are thought to maintain a higher level of excitation of the brain stem reticular formation, thus keeping the person interested and alert rather than bored and sleepy.

Our concept of task appeal is related to, but separate from, the challenge provided by the task. Following from Hackman and Oldham's (1980) work on job characteristics, a challenging task is not only novel and varied, it also provides the organization member with autonomy, feedback about performance, the chance to do whole meaningful pieces of work, and it is significant in the larger scheme of things.

Task ambiguity occurs when an individual receives unclear expectations about how he or she should carry out a task or about what the final outcome should be. This is derived from Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal's (1964) concept of role ambiguity. We expect that people will put off tasks that are not clearly defined. Inconsistent or vague expectations about how a task should be completed may cause an individual to avoid that task and concentrate on less ambiguous tasks.

Lack of deadline pressure may also increase the probability of task procrastination. It is easier to put off a task when it need not be completed by a specific time or when that task has a deadline that is far in the future. In contrast, it is difficult to procrastinate when a task has a firm deadline and that deadline allows a person little time to put off the task.

The Focal Task and Other Tasks

The relationship between the focal task and other tasks expected of the incumbent may also predict procrastination. Specifically, interdependence with other tasks, the degree of residual quantitative overload experienced by the person, and the relative importance of the focal task may predict task procrastination.

Interdependence with other tasks occurs when the completion of an individual's other tasks is dependent on the completion of the focal task. Our concept of interdependence with other tasks is different than the

concept of task interdependence defined in past research (Van de Ven, Delbecq, & Koenig, 1976; Van de Ven & Ferry, 1980). Task interdependence has been defined by these researchers as the degree to which people are dependent upon one another to do their individual jobs.

Interdependence with other tasks is expected to be negatively related to procrastination. Putting off an interdependent task may interfere with other tasks that a person is expected to complete. In contrast, a person may find it relatively easy to put off a task that will not interfere with his or her other responsibilities.

Residual quantitative overload is the degree that the remaining tasks expected of the person (other than the focal task) demand excessive time and energy. This concept is derived from the concept of role overload (Sales, 1969). The probability of putting off a focal task is likely to increase when remaining tasks put excessive demands on the time and energy of the focal person.

The relative importance of the focal task in relation to other tasks may also help predict procrastination. The relative importance of a task may be determined by comparing it with other tasks. Relative to this rank-ordering are preferences held by the person responsible for the task, societal expectations about the value of the task, and rewards provided by the organization for the focal task in relation to other tasks. The role of the reward system will be explored further in the following section on organizational variables.

The Focal Task and Organizational Attributes

While a wide range of organizational attributes could be included in the procrastination framework, the impact of the normative system, the reward system, and the information system are thought to be most profound. The normative system comprises "those overarching 'shalts' and 'shalt nots' which govern the actions, imply the sanctions, and in time permeate the souls of organization members" (Kahn et al., 1964, pp. 150-151). These "shalts" and "shalt nots" influence a given task at both a specific and a general level. At the specific level, local norms may encourage members to put off some tasks and discourage procrastination of others. For example, in one university that we know of, graduate student procrastination of coursework is widely accepted, but procrastination of research tasks is strongly discouraged.

Turning to the general level, organizations (or departments or work groups) may develop norms about procrastination that apply to all tasks. In some organizations, procrastination of any task may be sanctioned heavily; while in others, procrastination of all tasks may be subtly, or not so subtly,

encouraged. The probability that a focal task will be procrastinated would certainly be influenced by the strength and direction of these general expectations.

The organizational reward system is one mechanism for maintaining norms. By organizational reward system we mean those inducements such as pay, benefits, or promotions that an organization provides its members in return for member contributions such as performance or loyalty (March & Simon, 1958). Those tasks not associated with valued rewards provided by the organization are more likely to be procrastinated than those tied to valued rewards. This notion is consistent with reinforcement models of behavior (e.g., Skinner, 1953; Luthans & Kreitner, 1975); these theories hold that rewarded behaviors tend to be repeated. Yet our framework differs from these theories. We maintain that knowledge of reinforcement contingencies is necessary but not sufficient for predicting task procrastination.

Organization members learn about norms and rewards through the information system. The organizational information system comprises those links over which messages flow back and forth among members. These links, and the messages transmitted through them, can be formal as in the case of company newsletters, posted announcements, and written rules and regulations. They can also be informal as in the case of unplanned conversations among co-workers about their tasks, as well as rumors and gossip about things that do not bear directly on the job.

Following from the literature on communication in organizations (e.g., Guetzkow, 1965; Porter & Roberts, 1976), we propose that task procrastination will be less likely when messages about a task are clear and explicit, are sent over a variety of communication channels, and are conveyed through a variety of communication media. If only inaccurate or insufficient information is provided by the organizational information system about a task, then a member is unlikely to know how and when it should be completed, as well as how important the focal task is in comparison to other work.

The lack of information makes a task more difficult to predict, understand, and control. Lack of prediction, understanding, and control over stimuli in the workplace are thought to be a source of profound stress for all organizational members (Sutton & Kahn, in press). People may avoid these sources of distress by focusing their efforts on tasks for which there is good information, and procrastinating tasks for which there is poor information.

Discretion as a Constraint

In addition to the three classes of main effects just described, we have identified a single moderator variable, task discretion. This is the amount of

freedom and control a person is allowed by the task; this concept is based on Hackman and Lawler's (1971) concept of autonomy. If an individual has little or no discretion, particularly with respect to pace control, he or she will simply not have the opportunity to procrastinate. Jobs on assembly lines, for example, provide workers with little or no opportunity to put off tasks. Thus, discretion may serve to constrain the relationship among the three classes of predictors and task procrastination.

DISCUSSION

The preliminary model of task procrastination we have presented may be used in at least two different ways. First, it is a fairly well-specified model that contains a set of variables that are potentially assessable. Propositions are made above that can be empirically confirmed or disconfirmed. Second, the framework contains three general categories of predictors: characteristics of the focal task, the relationship between the focal task and other tasks, and attributes of the organization. It also contains a category for moderators of the situation-procrastination relationship. These categories may be used as a starting point for those who wish to extend and refine this model.

In an effort to maintain parsimony at this early stage of theory development, we have avoided discussion of interactions among these predictors of procrastination, as well as discussion of ways in which these predictors can serve as intervening variables. Yet future iterations of this model may be enhanced by further specification of the interrelationship among predictor variables. To illustrate, the model now presents organizational information system and task ambiguity as independent predictors of procrastination. A future elaboration of the model may specify that a poor information system leads to greater task ambiguity, which in turn causes procrastination of the task.

There are a number of potential problems in measuring procrastination. People may be less inclined to report task procrastination because of its negative connotations. Self-report measures of procrastination could be confounded by the issue of social desirability, that is, the tendency to say good rather than bad things about oneself (Nunnally, 1978). Perhaps this problem can be alleviated by using supervisors, co-workers, and researchers as observers of procrastination. Yet supervisors may encounter a biased sample of behaviors; subordinates may avoid procrastination when the boss is watching. Using co-workers as observers may also be problematic. Norms may exist against reporting negative information about one's fellow workers.

Although the term procrastination generally has negative connotations, there may be positive outcomes associated with putting off a

task. Some organization members may derive personal benefits by procrastinating. If they do so long enough, someone else may complete the task for them. In other cases, however, procrastination may benefit both the individual and the organization.

For those people in unchallenging and monotonous jobs, putting off a task for even a short time may be the only way to increase variety and control in their jobs. Procrastination of this type has been referred to as "banana time" (Roy, 1959). In addition to the psychological benefits for the employee, procrastination in such cases may be useful to the organization because of possible reductions in absenteeism and turnover.

Finally, procrastination may also lead to positive outcomes for people in highly challenging jobs that require creative thought. Little is known about the process of creative thinking; yet much of it seems to occur on a nonconscious level (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). It is possible that procrastination could aid this process and lead to solutions that enhance the quality of organizational innovations.

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