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Practice

The urgent and the important: why we choose the task that ends soon

The "urgency effect" in the experiments of Meng Zhu, Yang Yang and Christopher Hsee (2018), the saying attributed to Eisenhower and a simple way to set priorities

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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In a 1954 speech, the American president **Dwight D. Eisenhower** quoted a former college president: "I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent." From this idea later came the so-called "Eisenhower matrix", although he himself never drew it as a table.

The experiments

In 2018 the researchers Meng Zhu, Yang Yang and Christopher Hsee published a series of experiments with a simple question: when we have two tasks, one with a short deadline and the other with a larger payoff, which do we choose?

In one experiment, participants could choose between two similar tasks. One gave a smaller reward but had a deadline that was running out. The other gave a larger reward and had more time. Many participants chose the task with the short deadline, even though it meant earning less. They did this even when the deadline was meaningless, created artificially by the researchers. The authors called this "**the mere urgency effect**".

The effect was weaker when participants were less busy or when they were reminded to think about the final outcome of each task.

> *Urgency speaks to us loudly. The important often waits in silence.*

The four quadrants

A well-known way to set priorities is to divide tasks into four groups:

- **Important and urgent:** do them now, such as a real deadline or a health problem.
- **Important, not urgent:** plan them, such as exercise, learning or a big project. This is where most progress happens.
- **Urgent, not important:** cut them down or delegate them, such as many emails and interruptions.
- **Neither urgent nor important:** limit them.

The matrix is not a magic solution, and few studies test it directly. But it forces us to ask the question that the urgency effect makes us forget.

The second quadrant

The matrix became widely known thanks to Stephen Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, published in 1989. Covey argued that the most effective people are not those who manage crises best, but those who spend more time in the second quadrant: important things that are not urgent, such as planning, relationships, health and learning. According to him, when we neglect these things, they often turn into urgent crises later. This idea has not been proven by experiments, but many people find it useful.

Parkinson's law

In 1955 the British historian Cyril Northcote Parkinson wrote a satirical essay in *The Economist*, which began with the sentence: work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. As an example he mentioned an elderly lady who spends an entire day writing and sending a postcard, a task a busy person would do in three minutes. The law is not a scientific result, but it describes something many people recognise: without a deadline, even important tasks drag on without end.

Deadlines we set ourselves

Do the deadlines we set ourselves help? In 2002 Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch gave students three written assignments. One group had evenly spaced deadlines set by the professor, one group could choose its own deadlines, and a third group could hand everything in at the end. The students who chose their own deadlines received better grades than those without deadlines, but worse than those with deadlines set from outside. So self-imposed deadlines help, but people do not always set them in the best way.

Quiet time

In the late 1990s the sociologist Leslie Perlow studied a team of software engineers who were constantly interrupted by colleagues with urgent questions. They often worked late into the night to get their main work done. Perlow proposed an experiment: a few hours a week would be "quiet time", when no one could interrupt anyone else. During the experiment, many engineers reported higher productivity. But when the experiment ended, the team quickly went back to its old habits, which shows how hard it is to change a culture of urgency.

Busyness as a status symbol

Why do we find it so hard to resist urgencies? One reason may be social. In 2017 Silvia Bellezza, Neeru Paharia and Anat Keinan showed that in the United States, people who constantly talk about how busy they are are seen by others as having higher status. The economists Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, in their book *Scarcity*, explain that when we have very little time, attention narrows to what is most pressing and loses sight of what matters in the long run. This makes urgency even more attractive.

Practical advice

1. **Before opening email in the morning,** write down one important task for today.

2. **Book time in the calendar** for important tasks, as if they were meetings.
3. **Ask of every deadline:** "Is it real? What happens if I do it tomorrow?"
4. **Think about the outcome,** not only about the feeling of relief when a task is finished.

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