Motivational Effects of Reminders on Accelerating Or Delaying Task Completion

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We examine the effect of reminders on multiple goal pursuit. We show an interaction between reminders and propensity to plan on when people schedule tasks and on whether they complete them. Reminders help completion for people high in propensity to plan, but hurt for people low in propensity to plan.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on prospective memory and implementation intentions advocates the use of reminders. Many papers show that without reminders as simple memory aids or more elaborate aids linking the future context with a behavior, such as implementation intentions, people fail to finish their plans. However, most work has been conducted with single tasks. Participants are asked to perform a task and the presence of reminders is manipulated. In real life, we juggle multiple tasks. Students report on average 15 ongoing projects (Little 1989). In our studies, participants also easily report 10 planned tasks such as academic (buy study materials), health (lose weight), interpersonal (call my parents) and recreational tasks (go out with friends). Surprisingly, the few papers that asked participants to deal with multiple tasks found no effects of reminders (3 papers).

We predict and show an interaction between reminders and propensity to plan on when people schedule tasks and on whether they complete them. Reminders help people high in propensity to plan to resume an interrupted task in the future and to maintain vigilance for opportunities to finish it. But they harm the execution of other tasks that demand immediate attention. On the contrary, reminders hurt those low on propensity to plan to resume an interrupted task and they decrease the urgency to start working on the task. But they also free up cognitive resources to be used for other tasks that require immediate attention.

People are motivated to finish what they have started. As a result, as they get close to finishing a task, the value of a unit of progress is quite motivating (Kivetz, Urminsky, and Zheng 2006). Yet, one of the most fundamental problems with planning is that people often do not complete their plans. This is because people often commit to more tasks than they can attend (Zauberman and Lynch 2005). People often think they will have spare of time in the future and say yes to future commitments, only to regret making those commitments at a later point in time (the “Yes…Damn!” effect, Zauberman and Lynch 2005). This illusion of time slack in the future causes consumers to procrastinate on tasks.

Our attentional system monitors information that is relevant to our current goals and leaves out of consideration information that is not relevant. This process of monitoring of relevant information for current goal pursuit is determined by our motivations and occurs automatically without the necessity of an explicit intention to attend to this information (Moskowitz 2002; Vogt, De Houwer, Moors, van Damme, and Crombez 2010). Unfulfilled tasks that one has to perform compete for attention. And highly accessible alternatives are more likely to be considered (Frederick, Novemsky, Wang, Dhar, and Nowlis 2009).

In our experimental paradigm, we asked participants to list ten tasks they intended to perform over the following week(s), manipulated whether participants were prompted to specify reminders or measured their use of reminders and measured their propensity to plan. Later we asked participants to schedule the tasks. The number of days from the experimental session that participants schedule tasks was used as our main dependent variable. We show that reminders interact with propensity to plan to affect when people schedule tasks. The presence of reminders included as a within or between-participants factor interacts with propensity to plan included as a continuous factor to predict when people schedule tasks and whether they complete them. Consumers high in propensity to plan are motivated to schedule tasks sooner when they generate reminders than when they do not. This is because people high in propensity to plan elaborate more on how to execute tasks. Elaboration on tasks is associated with breaking larger tasks into subtasks, highlighting the need to get started. Tasks scheduled sooner are more likely to be completed, so reminders help these consumers complete the tasks. However, for consumers low on propensity to plan, generating reminders has exactly the opposite effect. Those low in propensity to plan are less prone to elaborate on tasks they plan to undertake; the tasks are at a more molar level that inspires less urgency. Generating a reminder can be a tool for self-delusion for consumers thinking at this molar level, who act as if writing a task down on a post-it note is sufficient to ensure that the task will be completed. Reminders cause these consumers to schedule tasks later than they would if they generated no reminders for the same tasks. Procrastinating the scheduled of these tasks leads to lower completion of the tasks, despite the greater time allowed for completion (cf. Ariely and Wertenbroch 2002).

Ideally, reminders would help people allocate cognitive resources optimally – to remember to complete consumer tasks in the future without disrupting focus on some new task undertaken after setting the reminder. The present research shows that reminders involve a trade-off. They help people high on propensity to plan to resume an interrupted task in the future and to maintain vigilance for opportunities to complete it. But they harm the execution of other tasks that demand immediate attention. Reminders hurt those low on propensity to plan to resume an interrupted task and they decrease the urgency to start working on the task. But they also free up cognitive resources to be used for other tasks that require immediate attention.

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