

# TASK PROCRASTINATION: OVERCOMING THROUGH RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Delaying job responsibilities is one of the major workplace issues. The reasons and causes of delay are however manifold and discouraging. The behavior of task procrastination negatively affects the productivity of employees. The current research work has explored the leading causes of work and task procrastination behavior of employees through the lens of social exchange theory (SET). The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research method is used, and the qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed by the purposive sampling technique and thematic analysis were conducted to capture the various themes. Findings show that unethical practices, low psychological association, contractual employment system, lack of interest & desire, low self-esteem and complex jobs are the leading causes of task procrastination.*

**Keywords:** Procrastination, Employee Behavior, Employee Performance, Task Performance

## INTRODUCTION

The current organizational workplaces have become complicated due to increasing global diversity. Organizations today need motivated employees to compete with the global market leaders. Globalization and management principles have significantly affected business organizations in Pakistan as elsewhere in the world. Organizations have thus developed many strategies to obtain desired work behavior of employees. Procrastination is still a major behavioral issue that is continually affecting the performance of employees. Procrastination is a self-handicapping, and dysfunctional psychological behavior in which employees put things off, and such type of behavioral state prevent them from doing things timely. Research studies show that procrastination affects every employee (Aziz & Tariq, 2013; Bhutto, Mohsin & Niazi, 2011; Chu & Choi, 2005; Hunter & Thatcher, 2007; Irfan, Khizar, Murtaza, & Iftakhar, 2015; Naveed & Ishtiaq, 2015).

The delaying behavior of job responsibilities and tasks is a major organizational behavioral problem. Procrastination of duties causes poor performance and high employee turnover. Research studies have reported that procrastination is a complicated process having behavioral components that could negatively affect the organizational performance (Abbasi & Alghamd, 2015; Aziz & Tariq; 2013; Bhutto et al., 2011; Ferrari & Diaz-Morales, 2014; Gupta, Hershey, & Gaur, 2012; Irfan et al., 2015; Naveed & Ishtiaq, 2015; Skowronski & Mirowska, 2013). Procrastination behavior of employees at the workplace is harmful, and researchers are still interested in investigating the causes, and issues related to this behavior. Researchers have linked the procrastinating behavior with corporate and social issues (Steel, 2007). Task procrastination has been a business dilemma for corporate planners and a topic of interest for researchers in Pakistani context, because it affects both employees and organizational performance which causes a highly alarming situation (Bhutto et al., 2011). The current research study has used the SET framework and explored the leading causes, contributors, and remedies of procrastination behavior of employees at the workplace. The findings of the study have valuable theoretical and practical implications.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Previous research studies have highlighted the negative aspects and impacts of job procrastinating behavior of employees. However, such research studies are rare in the Pakistani context. This research study has explored the causes and work-related procrastination behavior of employees and incorporated the practical experience of senior executives working in business organizations of Pakistan. Following questions were developed to examine and investigate the causes of job procrastination behavior.

Question 01: What are the significant reasons for task procrastination?

Question 02: What strategies do you recommend avoiding task procrastination?

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **Task Procrastination**

Employees usually delay job-related responsibilities. This behavior is called tasks procrastination. This unique behavior has negatively affected the corporate productivity. Research studies have investigated the various and typical dimensions of procrastinating behavior. Researchers have concluded that the procrastinating conduct of employees provides limited and short-term relief. However, other adverse consequences of procrastination are stress, high costs, illness and poor work quality (Gupta et al., 2012).

Paulitzki (2010), says that the role of task characteristic is essential and that the employees usually avoid unpleasant tasks. Procrastination is a severe work-related problem because it negatively influences the performance and well-being. Habitual procrastination of tasks weakens the effect of sound intentions to perform and execute unpleasant tasks and the avoidance patterns, and regulatory capacities are equally essential to understand the procrastination behavior. Laschke, Hassenzahl, Brechmann, Lenz, and Digel (2013) have highlighted procrastination as a widespread phenomenon and its reasons manifold, like task characteristics, the unpleasantness of the task, benefits, as individual interest differences, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. White-collar workers show the higher degree of procrastination as compared to the low-level and unskilled employees. Many job aspects like fear of failure, anxiety, and self-efficacy accelerate and develop procrastinating behavior (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2015; Steel, 2007).

Corporate culture and a challenging work environment accelerates positive organizational behavior (Ismat, Bashir, & Mahmood, 2011). Various positive behavioral forces develop a conducive and dynamic workplace (Parakash, 2015). Employees are a unique asset of an organizational. This uniqueness is due to the diversified aspects of their behavior. Research studies have reported that employees play a significant role in organization development process (Arshad, Asif, & Baloch, 2012) and the success of any organization is positively related to motivated employees (Bushra, 2012; Farooq, 2015; Mariam, Shoaib, & Shoaib, 2015; Moon, Habib, & Attiq, 2015). Ismat et al. (2011) have analyzed the determinants of culture in business organizations and indicated that business organizations face difficulties to establish strong cultural values in the current global business environment, creating critical workforce diversity as a significant issue. They further highlighted the role of task procrastination in organizational culture and recommended that business organizations should establish and maintain strong and values-based culture to contribute towards goals and objectives of the organizations. The study is built on the theoretical framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET), which has the potential to explain organizational behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchel, 2005). SET emphasizes on positive interactions and psychological association among persons who are interdependent, and they are responsible for yielding quality relationships. Rousseau (1995), has explained the changing psychological contracts in employment.

### **Theories of Procrastination**

Research studies show that many theories are associated with procrastination behavior of people in different organizations. Siaputra (2010), has explained

procrastination through Temporal Motivation Theory. Steel and Konig (2006), and other old approaches explain psychoanalytic and psychodynamic, behaviorist and cognitive theory. Bhutto et al. (2011), have determined the relation between impulsiveness and procrastination behavior and concluded that the two factors affect each other. Impulsiveness is a quick and inappropriate reaction to the situation, and it is a personality trait.

### ***Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic Theory***

Siaputra (2010) cited that task procrastination is due to the existence of potential threat posed by a task. Psychodynamic theorists have related the task procrastination to the childhood problems. The role of parents is vital in personality development process. The behavior of a child and a person is more dependent and rooted in parenting.

### ***Behaviorist Theory***

Previous studies show that behavior development is an ongoing process and that many personal factors also accelerate and affect this process. Siaputra (2010), reported that certain procrastination behavior is developed if a person succeed in exercising a specific conduct.

### ***Cognitive Theory***

Many research studies have explained task procrastination through cognitive theory in which irrational beliefs, vulnerable self-esteem, and the inability to take decisions causes procrastination (Fatima, Atif, Saqib, & Haider, 2012; Siaputra, 2010). People believe in and are rewarded on quality work. Siaputra (2010), assets that doing quality and good work as an irrational belief affects a person performance negatively if fail to do the work optimally. People also use procrastination strategy to protect self-esteem and delay tasks having no ability to take appropriate decisions.

### ***Temporal Motivation Theory (TMT)***

Siaputra (2010), has reported that people delay tasks when they think the utility of doing the task is not high. Siaputra (2010), has rated TMT as the best theory to explain procrastination. Steel and Konig (2006), have formulated and initiated the temporal motivational theory (TMT). TMT provides a common framework to explain the human behavior as to prioritize the work according to his utility.

### ***Construal Level Theory***

McCrea, Liberman, Trope, and Sherman (2008), have presented their additional perspective and reported that the representation and

understanding of a task influence the completion period and time. The illustration and knowledge of a task are more critical, and it affects the procrastination behavior and the performance of participants increase when the task is presented more concretely (McCrea et al., 2008).

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

As discussed, task procrastinating behavior of employees is a complex behavioral problem. The causes of this behavioral dilemma were explored and investigated while using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), qualitative research approach. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a methodological approach used to examine the personal perceptions and experiences of participants in life and associated cognitions (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Goulding, 2005). Many research studies have used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach to explore the social and business phenomena (French, Maissi, & Marteau, 2005; Griffiths, 2009).

This research has employed the semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2007), as a data collection tool which maintains the aim of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Griffiths, 2009). Following questions were developed to explore and investigate the causes of procrastination behavior.

Question 01: What are the significant reasons for task procrastination?

Question 02: What strategies do you recommend to avoid task procrastination?

Semi-structured interviews (Annexure 01) with thirty managers were conducted to gather the qualitative data. The purposive sampling method was used to collect data from various industrial units in Pakistan. A selected sample of 30 industrial units is drawn from the list of industries registered with Security and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). The inclusion criteria was to incorporate, in the study, all the major industries located near Lahore, Pakistan. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the noted data. The emerging themes were extracted and captured, and a final statement of the connected themes was prepared. Braun and Clarke (2006), have suggested that thematic analysis is a suitable qualitative data analysis technique. The technique helps to analyze a qualitative data and to capture themes and ideas within data. The social exchange theory supported to explore the major causes of task procrastination.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Demographics of participants are presented in Table 1 Participants were experienced and highly professionals in their fields, and they shared their experiences in detail.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants

Participants	Age Group	Experience	Qualification	Industry
P1	50-55	25	B.Sc. Chemical Engineering	Chemical Manufacturing
P2	50-55	25	B.Sc. Chemical Engineering	Chemical Manufacturing
P3	45-50	25	M.Sc. Chemistry	Pharmaceutical
P4	45-50	21	B.Sc. Textile Engineering	Textile
P5	50-55	22	B.Sc. Chemical Engineering	Chemical Manufacturing
P6	50-55	28	B.Sc. Textile Engineering	Textile
P7	45-50	26	B.Sc. Chemical Engineering	Pharmaceutical
P8	55-60	30	M.Sc. Chemistry	Pharmaceutical
P9	45-50	21	B.Sc. Mechanical Engineering	Home Appliances
P10	45-50	23	M.A Political Science	Chemical Manufacturing
P11	50-55	31	B.Sc. Chemical Engineering	Cement
P12	55-60	25	M.Sc. Chemistry	Cement
P13	55-60	33	B.Sc. Mechanical Engineering	Automobile
P14	55-60	30	M.Sc. Chemistry	Beau rages
P15	40-45	18	M.Sc. Chemistry	Pharmaceutical
P16	55-60	32	MBA Marketing	Home Appliances
P17	40-45	24	B.Sc. Chemical Engineering	Chemical Manufacturing
P18	40-45	21	MBA Human Resource	Pharmaceutical
P19	55-60	33	M.Sc. Physics	Home Appliances
P20	55-60	20	Master in Computer Science	Hotel
P21	55-60	19	B.Sc. Chemical Engineering	Chemical Manufacturing
P22	55-60	34	ACCA	Cement
P23	45-50	27	B.Sc. Chemical Engineering	Textile
P24	60-65	37	MBBS	Pharmaceutical
P25	45-50	22	ACMA	Textile
P26	60-65	36	MBA Finance	Construction
P27	60-65	20	PhD	Education
P28	40-45	18	B.Sc. Civil Engineering	Education
P29	40-45	20	MBA Marketing	Insurance
P30	60-65	35	B-Pharmacy	Health Care

**Legend:** B.Sc.: Bachelor of Science, M.Sc.: Master of Science, M.A: Master of Arts, MBA: Master of Business Administration, ACCA: Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, MBBS: Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, ACMA: Association of Cost and Management Accountants, B. Pharmacy: Bachelor of Pharmacy, PhD: Doctor of Philosophy

## Reasons for Task Procrastination

Analyses were conducted to explore and investigate the answers to the research questions. Participants shared their experiences that the procrastinating behavior of employees is a major hurdle in the achievement of organizational objectives.

*Anxiety is one of the reasons for procrastination at workplace.....P2, P9, P10, P12, and P15*

Anxiety disturbs future expectations, and a person believes that things cannot be controlled. Majority of the participants reported that one primary reason for anxiety is uncertainty in our social and business life. Majority of the population is disturbed and anxious due to the uncertain and polarized behavior of the corporate managers. Policies, rules, and regulation are manipulated in their own interest. People are being cheated. Ordinary people have no access to the facilities. This behavior has significantly affected the culture of the business organizations. Knaus (2010), has stated that reasons for procrastination behavior vary from person to person. Everybody procrastinate tasks, but it has been identified that 20 percent of people procrastinate chronically. Knaus (2010), has further explained that anxiety is a major reason for the procrastination.

*Employees procrastinate things due to the unethical and polarized behavior of corporate managers. Employees lose thrust when they are treated unethically and when there is injustice in organizational policies.....P2 and P4*

Participants reported that the image of the collapsed society has negatively affected the business organizations in Pakistan. The loyalty of employees changes when their expectations do not meet, and employees think that the organization is not favorable place for working. This factor increases the frustration and anxiety of employees due to which do not complete tasks timely.

Participants further stated that one reason for procrastination is employee-organization disassociation tendency, because employers disown employees and many contractual systems are implemented to avoid legal issues. Organizations need to develop and enforce employees-oriented policies to firmly bind the employees with the organizations. Moreover, substantial hiring and retention strategies should be implemented to improve the association behavior of employees.

*Employees procrastinate tasks due to the weak psychological association with the organization. Contractual system of employment is also a primary cause of weak association.....P8*



Unfair implementation of contractual employment system is a problem of motivation and self-esteem and employees have a negative perception of their employment status in their organizations. Unfair employment system creates frustration, anxiety, depression, and helplessness among employees and establishes a weak association. Participants believe that long-term poor psychological association of employees with the organization create a contrary evolution of behavior and cause a loss motivation and personal productivity. Participants shared that the current organizational environment in Pakistan is utterly hostile, and it decreases the performance of the individual and corporate productivity. The cure for this type of procrastination is the re-establishment of psychological association between employee and employer.

*A strong predictor of task procrastination is also the manipulated contractual employment system in organizations in Pakistan and self-esteem..... P10 and P12*

Participants shared that organizations have manipulated the current employment system in their favor and interests and employees do not receive even their legal rights. Employees perceive that they are not being considered in organizational matters. Organizations are cheating employees and in return employees are defrauding the organizations which are a significant cause of chronic procrastination. To fight procrastination due to the manipulated contractual system, participants suggested employees' oriented and beneficial employment strategies. The regulatory bodies are not playing their role to correct the shaped employment system. This system has development impulsive, irresponsible, lethargic behavior and feeling of discomfort among employees even in this critical unemployment state.

*One primary reason is the unfair treatment of employees.....P13*

The current workforce is now more mature and aware of the employment rights and knows employment laws and regulations. Unfair treatment of employees at workplace causes the development of insecurity, discrimination, and isolation. Isolation and polarization of employees develop the culture of procrastination. Participants shared their experiences that there is a perception un-protection among employees. Employment laws are not implemented in the real sprite. The main reasons given by participants for unfair treatment at work are the policies, procedures, and systems of the employers and corporate managers. Fairness in working develops the behavior, mood, attitude, and performance of employees. Justice also enhances trust and respect within an organization.



*Employees procrastinate due to a non-autonomous form of organizational policies and lack of interest and desire ..... P27 and 28*

Participants shared their work life experiences and stated that employees procrastinate job responsibilities because they do not want to do the job due to lack of interest and desire. A delegation of duties to right persons is a critical management tool, and supervisors should be careful in delegating the functions. The natural interest and psychological association of employees is an essential job aspect. The stimulation of inherent interest in a job is mandatory to achieve the desired performance. So, employees voluntarily delay a task to a later date, and it causes loss of production.

*Work and role complexity is also a primary cause of procrastination..... P18 and P15*

Participants reported that some jobs are more complicated than others. Employees face hurdles to complete the cumbersome and unclear job thus results in frustration, stress, and anxiety at the workplace. Job complexity is the duties, the degree of autonomy and the scope of job responsibilities at the workplace. They further stated that human resource department and job supervisors should determine the capacity level of an employee before assigning the job for the best match. A complex role beyond the capability cause job-related stress and dissatisfaction (Pathak, 2011).

*Employees expect more from the current organizational environment. Procrastination is due to low employees' self-esteem within organization..... P10*

Organization policies develop the culture of low self-esteem. Beheshtifar and Hashemi-Nasab (2012), have stated that employees in organizations with high self-esteem believe that they are essential. Self-esteem is a valuable aspect of organization development process.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research was conducted to investigate and understand the causes of task procrastination and the social exchange relationships at workplace. Social exchange association is a mutual and reciprocal process. The concepts of SET is applicable when deciding on employer-employee work relationships. Participants reported that procrastination at the workplace is due to the unethical and polarized behavior of corporate managers. Actions of corporate managers that do not conform to the acceptable standards create poor organizational culture. Exploitation and lying to employees are unethical practices. Business and management ethics are guidelines for organizations. McIntire and Miller (2007), have also

reported that ethical standards are essential at workplaces. Tonus and Oruc (2012), have investigated that unethical behavior causes substantial loss to organizations at each level. Parakash (2015), has stated that organizations should develop effective management and organizational strategies to promote productive culture to control the unethical behavior of employees. Moreover, organizations should create a culture in which there is a clear understanding of the ethical and the immoral conduct.

One reason for procrastination is the employee-employer poor psychological association due to the contractual employment system in organizations. The psychological contract is an essential aspect of workplace relationships. It defines the mutual expectations and feelings of employees (Bibi, Karim, & Din, 2013). Waiganjo (2012), have explored that a psychological contract explains the employment relationship and expectations that exist between employees and their employers. Psychological association establishes perceptions, expectations and workplace relationships (Guest, 2007). Similarly, unfair contractual employment system creates frustration, anxiety, and depression among employees and cause poor workplace association. Laschke et al. (2013), have explored that re-mind is an excellent approach to change the behavior and this study has added the concept of re-establishment with re-mind to change the behavior of both employees and employer at the workplace. The re-establishment of psychological association can help to overcome procrastination.

Organizational policies and lack of interest and desire is a major reason for task procrastination. Performance cannot be achieved without motivation, and the lack of interest and willingness show that employees are not motivated. Studies reveal that motivation gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual, physical effort. Motivation is an important aspect of a job. Motivation provides employees the direction and line of action. Negative and non-supportive business and organizational environment destroy motivation and willingness. The role of motivation, performance, and procrastination has been investigated in organizations in Pakistan. The results of previous research studies show that employees are one of the important components of any work environment. (Ashraf & Khan, 2013; Baloch, 2010; Bukhari et al., 2009; Bushra, 2012; Hussain & Yousaf, 2011; Ihsan-ul-Haq, Shah, Jaffari, Aziz, Ejaz, & Raza, 2011; Irshad & Toor, 2008; Manzoor, Khattak, & Hassan, 2015; Moon et al., 2015; Raza & Nawaz, 2011; Saeed, Shakeel, & Lodhi, 2013)

Employee-employer, employment contract is primarily a psychological contract. An employment contract is an agreement between an employee

and employer. Organizations have changed the current employment system in their interest. The current employment system has development impulsive, irresponsible and feeling of discomfort and developed procrastination behavior among employees.

During the data collection participants shared their life experiences that task procrastination cause stress and low organizational based self-esteem. Research studies also mentioned that task procrastination held negative consequences for low organizational self-esteem and increased stress (Iskender, 2011; Paulitzki, 2010). Siaputra (2010), has investigated the rationality of quality and good work. People use procrastination strategy to protect self-esteem and delay tasks as they have no ability to take appropriate decisions. According to Beheshtifar and Hashemi-Nasab (2012), employees with high self-esteem believe that they are valuable assets to their organizations.

Participants reported that complicated and unclear job contents accelerate the pace of task procrastination. Employees avoid completing the complex jobs or jobs involve possible confrontation. Employees face hurdles to complete the complex jobs. People are critical to organizational success and organizations cannot achieve their goals and objectives without a productive and efficient workforce. An unclear job affects the motivational level of an employee. Also the structure and contents of a job play a mediating role for employees' performance. Research studies show that procrastination is a pervasive problem. Anderson (2001), has stated that complex tasks or tasks that are unappealing and uninteresting are delayed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study has found many reasons for procrastination. Social Exchange Theory (SET) explain the inputs of positive behavior. Organizations provide a framework for social exchange relationships. Organizations should reinforce the employer-employee social association to achieve the desired behavior. Cultural inputs develop the behavior. The procrastination is associated with the social exchange process. Employees procrastinate due to the unethical and polarized behavior of seniors. The contractual employment system is a major cause of the procrastination behavior. Contractual employment develops frustration, anxiety, and depression. Non-supportive organizational culture and poorly defined policies and procedures cause de-motivation. Complicated and unclear jobs also cause procrastination. The study suggests the intense feeling of psychological association between employer and employee to achieve positive behavior.

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