

TIME MANAGEMENT

Why We Don't Ask for More Time on Deadlines (But Probably Should)

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Deadlines are one of the biggest sources of stress in the workplace. Yet, many are flexible: Your manager might ask you to submit a proposal for a long-term project by Friday, but not plan to look at it until Tuesday. Could asking for more time (when we need it) be a simple way to avoid feeling

panicked and overwhelmed? While it's common to believe that pushing back a deadline might reflect poorly on us and be seen as unprofessional, we know relatively little from research about the actual consequences of asking for more time.

To better understand this, we conducted 10 experiments and a survey with nearly 10,000 employees and managers in the U.S. We found that, across occupations, asking for more time to work on an assignment was, on average, perceived positively by managers – and it reduced employees' stress levels and improved their performance. In one survey we did, of 191 employees, we found that 95% of those who asked their manager for a deadline extension received one.

However, employees rarely ask for an extension, even when deadlines are clearly adjustable (e.g., their manager had explicitly said, "If you need more time, just ask"). For example, when we asked working adults how likely they would be to ask for an extension in a scenario where they felt highly time pressed under a tight yet adjustable deadline, only 1 in 10 employees responded that they would.

Across our studies, employees - especially female employees - worried that by asking for a deadline extension, their managers would think they were incompetent and unmotivated. But in contrast to employees' predictions, managers judged both male and female employees who asked for an extension as *more* motivated than those who did not. Managers did not see employees as less competent unless employees asked for an extension on a very urgent assignment.

Why women are less likely to ask for a deadline extension

To understand gender differences in the tendency to request a deadline extension, we conducted an additional survey of 600 U.S. employees across 22 industries, asking male and female employees to engage in a thought experiment: *Imagine your manager assigned you to work on a task that was due at the end of the week. How likely would you be to ask for an extension for this assignment?* We found that male employees were nearly twice as likely to request an extension compared to female employees.

Why? Although men also worried what their managers would think of them, women were much more likely to worry that their managers would judge them harshly for asking for more time. To understand if these fears were grounded in reality, we asked 800 managers to evaluate a male or

female employee who requested an extension. We found that managers did *not* judge female employees more negatively than male employees, suggesting that female employees' fears may be overblown.

Of course, there is a caveat here: Although managers may not immediately react more negatively to a single incident of a female employee asking for an extension, women's extension requests may confirm manager's beliefs that women are on average more family-oriented and less committed to their jobs. In qualitative research of U.S. consultants, managers were more accepting of women's requests for work-schedule accommodations such as parental leave - but these managers also perceived women who asked for such formal accommodations as being less committed to their jobs in general.

Women's strong concerns of being harshly judged for their extension requests may be tied to feeling less secure in their position at work and being more socially-focused. The female employees we surveyed expressed greater agreement with statements like "I am uncertain about my future career with my current company" and "When making a decision, I take other people's needs and feelings into account," which in turn explained how likely they were to ask for more time on a task.

The problem is that this aversion for asking for an extension predicted greater time stress and exhaustion among women. Across our studies, female employees indicated greater agreement with statements such as "I have felt like things have been really hectic" and "I always feel burned out at work."

Avoiding extension requests may also hurt women's workplace performance. In one experiment, we assigned 103 business school students to write a paper and gave them a flexible due date - if the student needed more time, they could email the instructor to request an extension without penalty. Once again, male students were twice as likely as their female peers to request an extension for the assignment. When the instructor, blind to who wrote the papers, graded them, students who had requested an extension turned in higher quality essays and received higher grades, controlling for their overall class performance.

What managers can do to help

Asking for more time to work on assignments with flexible deadlines can have benefits for employee performance and employee happiness – and might be especially beneficial for women, who are likely even busier than their male colleagues. (Female employees take on more tasks with low promotability, avoid delegating, and typically juggle more household responsibilities more than their male colleagues.)

There are strategies that managers and employees can employ to encourage team members to ask for more time when they need it:

Tell employees who need more time that they're not alone. Deadline extension requests often occur in private such as over email or during one-on-one conversations. As a result, employees underestimate how common these requests are. Communicating the prevalence of asking for extensions could be an easy and powerful way to reduce both male and female employees' fears of being singled out as incompetent and unmotivated.

Communicate that you yourself sometimes ask for deadline extensions. Another effective way to normalize extension requests is for leaders themselves to publicly ask for more time to think and complete work. For example, by saying, "I would like to take more time and put more thought in my response to your proposal", managers could help both male and female employees feel more comfortable when asking for more time on their tasks.

Clarify whether a deadline is flexible. Often, the strictness of a deadline is ambiguous: Employees may not know if the deadline is movable or not. When facing this ambiguity, employees who feel less secure in their jobs - which more often are female employees - may be more likely to air on the side of caution and avoid asking for more time. When assigning tasks, managers should clearly communicate deadline expectations and whether or not it is adjustable. Or, if you email an employee late at night, early in the morning, or on a weekend, be clear about why you are emailing at odd hours and whether you require a response. These simple actions could help both male and female employees manage their time more efficiently and claim more time to work on a task if necessary.

Stress about time is a major organizational concern - employees who feel overwhelmed at work are less happy, less healthy, and more likely to quit. And this stress is more likely to affect women, who typically do more work that is unvalued and take on more of the demands outside of work. Encouraging employees and especially women to ask for more time when they need it, could provide a simple solution to reducing burn out and creating more equitable work environments.

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