

CHAPTER 5

Procrastination in Administrative and Office Processes

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Summary. Procrastination is a phenomenon known in the field of project management, where it is referred to as student syndrome. It is important for proper planning and implementation of the Project schedule. However, this system-phenomenon also occurs in business processes, especially in the case of administrative and office processes managed automatically (work flow). The purpose of the chapter is to determine the scale and significance of procrastination in administrative and office processes. It seems that these levels are comparable to those not higher than for business projects. The chapter will present the causes and mechanism of procrastination in processes. The consequences of this phenomenon in processes will be characterized. Methods to prevent procrastination in processes will be proposed. The research methods used in the chapter are literature studies – a review of publications available in the Web of Science and Scopus databases and a case study of the process of servicing an unemployed person at the Poviast Labor Office in Dzierżoniów. On its basis, a significant level of procrastination in administrative processes was identified. The chapter indicates the need for diffusion of experiences between the area of project and process management.

Keywords: procrastination, process, project management

1. Introduction

Regardless of the field of study, scientific rights are of probabilistic nature. In life sciences, the strength of those laws is enhanced by the number of populations that the law applies to. For instance, one mole is equal to $6,02214076 \times 10^{23}$ molecular entities. In such large population (a critical mass) it is difficult to find an anomaly, i.e., the probability of the exception to the principle is extremely low, practically equal to zero. That is indicated by the of large numbers rule by Jakob Bernoulli. However, in case of small populations which are in scope of social sciences, the law does not apply due to the number of people currently living on Earth which is about of 7.6 billion which compared to the number of molecules is a quite

negligible number. Therefore, it is true to conclude that in case of the laws of social sciences, which are of a probabilistic nature as well, their strength will be adequately lower. Hence, the regularities confirmed with the 90–98% of probability are considered sufficient within the social sciences. This means that in case of social sciences – and management and organization sciences come under this category as well – the occurrence of anomalies/deviations from the rule or scientific laws is more common than in life sciences. This can be presented on the examples of regularities (of scientific laws) such as:

- human has only one heart – although clinical cases of people having two have also been found;
- people are basically right-handed – although it is estimated that there are exceptions to this rule (approximately 10% of population is left-handed).

A phenomenon such as procrastination, which means putting off impending tasks to a later time, is a typical behavior that characterizes a vast majority of the human population. This can be defined as a scientific law concerning people’s behaviours. If this phenomenon is common, therefore its impact on the organization of people’s work is important. In this chapter, causes and consequences of procrastination within process and project management will be explained and defined. This phenomenon is rather well-known and defined in the project management literature (Goldratt, 1997; Rand, 2000; Show & Yao, 2000; Smith, 2010), however, its presence within processes seemed to be unlikely. Review of publications in a database such as Web of Science and Scopus by keywords: procrastination, management, process showed few articles

42 articles were found in the Scopus database, of which 7 were strictly related to management sciences, 39 were found in the Web of Science, 6 were strictly about management. Most of the articles available in these databases overlapped.

None described procrastination in administrative processes.

But in the light of the author’s research, a procrastination in administrative and office processes is a common phenomenon though. The aim of this chapter is to identify the sources and effects of procrastination and to indicate the methods of reducing the scale of this phenomenon in the process management.

2. Procrastination in project management

This phenomenon has an important meaning for project management in terms of time management in particular. Formation of significant time buffers, in case of adverse events happening during the project implementation, is one of the reasons indicated. Each project should be characterised by a significant level of uniqueness by definition. This means that the project implementation is a subject to a high risk level associated with managing new original tasks within the projects. The longer list of such risk factors, and the greater probability that those will occur during the project, the greater time buffer planned.

Also, requesting a high probability of completing the project or its stage by given date has a significant impact on the size of this buffer. A common practice in project management is setting deadlines (*DL*). Deadline means a very high and requested probability, almost close to certainty (99%) that the project or stage will be finished by this date. Considering this

requirement, project managers seek for a significant slack time to buffer against unpleasant consequences associated with possible exceeding the deadline. Therefore, project managers include both an estimation of the time needed for real effective work (Te), and the time buffer (B) in case of potential risk factors.

$$DL = Te + B, \tag{1}$$

where:

- DL – time of project/stage implementation to the set deadline,
- Te – calculated time of effective work,
- B – time buffer in case of potential risk factors.

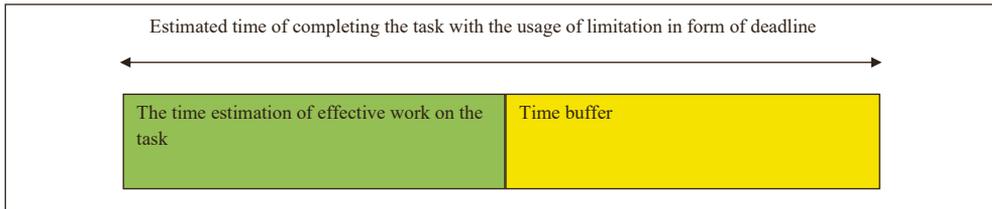


Fig. 1. Estimated time of completing project tasks

The author’s longtime research proves that the time buffer of respective tasks/stages in case of managing with the usage of deadlines is formed at the level from 100 to 200% of estimated effective work time. It is presented in Figure 1.

Those conclusions results from the observations as well as from the thought experiment that the author has run for 20 years in several hundred student groups during the project management classes.

When the project task or stage is secured with a huge time buffer, project managers usually experience a sense of feeling that they will make things done before the deadline. This comfort conduces to delay of the project kick-off or to tolerate a slow workflow. And this is an essence of the student’s syndrome as defined by E. Goldratt also known as procrastination.

An interesting conclusion from these studies could be a statement that when:

- time buffer makes up to 200% of the estimated effective work time,
- a completion of project task before the deadline is hardly ever observed, and... the inactivity takes most of the time.

The methods of limiting the procrastination in projects are still being developed in the source literature. The concept of critical chain assumes an aggressive time planning of task execution with a partial probability of success of about 50% and running the project buffer at the end of the schedule. This reduces a temptation to form large time buffers within respective stages by project managers. The main protection in such case is a buffer of entire project located at the end of the schedule which is at the disposal of the project owner and not under management of stages or task implementers (Goldratt, 1997).

The squeezing mechanism causes that under the constant manager’s supervisory, project managers of respective stages are not willing to show the procrastination behaviours (Jokiel, 2016).

Another solution to limitate the procrastination are economic incentives in the form of higher earnings for project managers contingent on the shorter time of project implementation. Those incentives could take a form of a higher contract amount or bonuses for faster completion of the project and opportunities to accelerate works on other income projects (Goldratt, 1997; Jokiel, 2019).

The above methods facilitate a successful project management (for instance, implementation before the planned date) without using the deadlines.

Another phenomenon causing the expansion of the safety time buffer in projects are additional tasks, i.e., tasks assigned by the external stakeholders, like the ones commissioned by the line managers; priorities; or overdue tasks of other projects run in parallel. The project management theory and practice has also overcome those issues. Managing the project portfolio or within the multitask environment is supported by the Project Management Office (PMO) (Barczak et al., 2018), also a support could be a CCMPM concept (Critical Chain Multi Project Management). It combines the critical chain method with five stages of constant system improvement in the constraints theory also known as POOGI cycle (The Process of Ongoing Improvement) (Łopatowska, 2009).

3. Procrastination in process management

It seems that in case of business or administrative processes, the phenomenon of procrastination should be strongly limited. This should be fostered by a repetitive nature of processes, ergo the routine of the implementation of standard activities, and processes' operations. A broad experience of managers and stable conditions in which the processes are carried out should translate to reduction of the time buffer size, and this would lead to a faster implementation and completion of process operations and the entire processes. This indeed happens in case of production or logistic processes, where every single minute matters, in rhythmic and mass production in particular. However, administrative and office processes have different nature. In such processes, a set top-down due date appears which simply means a deadline. It results from the legal principles implying a specific time, for example, when the bureau is obligated to process a claim. Another example of mechanism which creates deadlines could be a workflow management systems. They usually feature a date by which the task should be completed and reported in the system, e.g., by Friday 11:59 pm. After exceeding the date limit, system is being closed, and the latecomers could face troubles arisen from the need of using the alternative path. It is mostly used by the management team to take actions against the employees who did not complete tasks in given time, which is to discipline the workers.

However, if the deadlines are set with far due dates (i.e., the completion date is far enough to be done unhurriedly), then the space for procrastination is being formed.

Setting deadlines which assume long time periods to complete a certain task is the result of practices of administration services. It is premised that the office or bureau need a safe time to react or process an inquiry. Especially when the lack of response within a certain time horizon has administrative or legal consequences in the form of, for instance, the tacit acceptance procedure. Hence, the 30 day deadlines to process an application, pass judgement, or response the inquiry, although the actual time to perform those activities does not take more than a couple of minutes. Those long deadlines are also intended to ensure a proper operation of the office/bureau when the number of cases is growing. This might be due to various

factors from random fluctuations to the changing weather conditions, for instance, the highest intensity of applications is observed between 10–11 am, but during warm summer days, the applicants come to the bureaus early in the morning. In addition, the availability of resources is also the case (holidays, absences, dismissals etc.).

Also, the administration is permanently involved in many processes at the same time, and this is partially described by the mechanism above.

In such environment, it is noticed that postponing behaviours are the norm among administrative employees, e.g., clerks.

4. Procrastination in administrative processes – case study

The phenomenon of postponing actions in administrative processes will be illustrated on the example of Dzierżoniów Employment Agency (PUP). A standard process of serving the applicant or unemployed person is presented in Figure 2.

A person who visits the Labour Office needs to register first. Then he shows proper documents for the registration process. An unemployed person receives a registration card with the appointment date with an employment agent set by a clerk. The appointment must take place within a month from the registration date. Usually, such person meets an agent after 3 weeks from the registration date. Then, an applicant visits the Labour Market Department where he confirms his readiness to work. At the first meeting, the assistance plan is being defined. When determining the assistance plan, PUP analyses the applicant's situation and his chances on the labour market¹. After setting the plan, the employment agent analyses vacant positions at the PUP or proposes other forms of support. If a person meets the requirements, and after forming the individual action plan, a work referral is issued. If there are no job offers, then within 60 days a meeting to form an individual action plan is arranged with the unemployed person. Usually, the meetings are arranged on the last day. Individual action plan is a plan which includes registration dates in the bureau, as well as the applicant's self-tasks. It is adapted to the fixed assistance plan.

The registration card also includes following meeting dates in the bureau within 60 days after the last visits, which are confirmed by the unemployed person with his signature. If the job offer is accepted, the applicant receives the work referral and arranges an interview. Employer confirms whether the applicant will be hired or not. Unemployed person has 7 days to account for the referral. In case of refusal to accept a job offer, the proceeding regarding the unemployed status is initiated. A person, who rejected the offer or other form of support defined by law², submits a statement describing the reasons for refusal. Head of Labour Market Department makes a decision whether the applicant's rejection is justified or not. If the rejection is justified, the employment agent prepares the new job offers for the applicant. In case of unjustification, the applicant is excluded from the unemployed record. The exclusion period is statutorily defined and lasts 120 days in case of the first refusal; 180 days for the second one; and 270 days for the third and consecutive rejections.

¹ Regulation of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy of May 14, 2014 regarding profiling assistance for the unemployed (*Rozporządzenie...*, 2014).

² Act on employment promotion and labor market institutions (*Obwieszczenie Marszałka Sejmu...*, 2015 art. 33 ust. 4, pkt. 3).

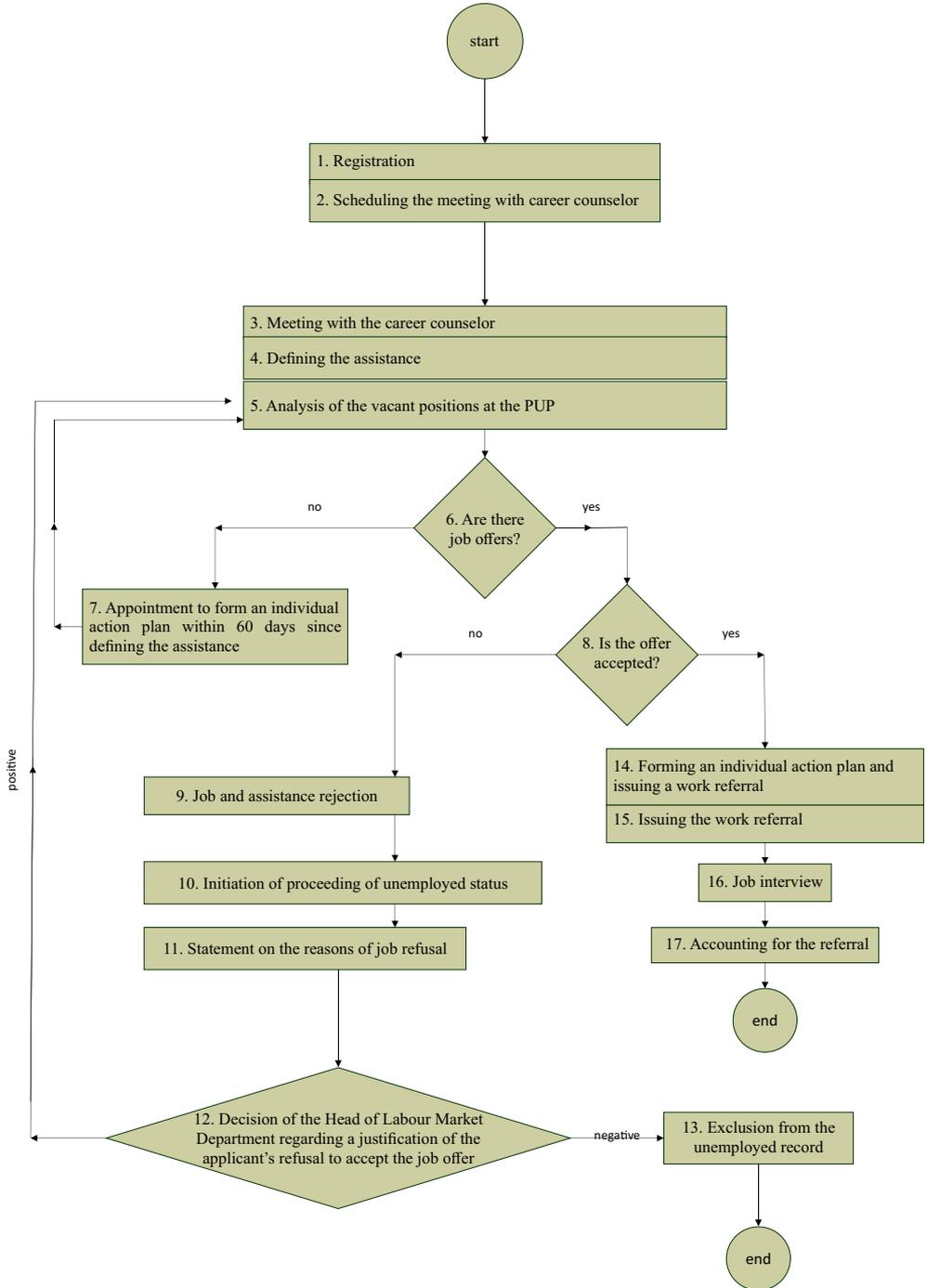


Fig. 2. Diagram of standard process of serving unemployed person at Employment Agency

Based on given example of the process of serving an unemployed person at PUP, a standard time for process implementation can be indicated, which, depending on the path, lasts from month up to three months. However, this could be handled within a few days. First of all, the meeting with employment agent should be arranged a day after the registration and not after three weeks. Also, in case of lack of job offers, the next date for meeting should not be set fixed but rather dependent on the new offers inflow. The applicant should be informed by phone when the new matching job offers pop up and be immediately arranged for a meeting with employment agent. Such activities would eliminate the procrastination from the task 2 and 7.

5. Proposed approaches to tackle procrastination in processes

Based on the experience from the project management field, some recommendations can be drawn to reduce the phenomenon of procrastination also within the process management. Among those recommendations, some should be especially highlighted:

- Consistent planning of the operations kick-off date in processes in the mode: “start as soon as possible”. Instead of allocating the tasks at the end of deadline, planning the tasks without considering any delays.
- The usage of Theory of Constraints (TOC) in process management, which is a focus on various bottlenecks: scheduling, cost, quality, ranging, resources, both in the project management (Jokiel, 2013) and processes.
- Limiting the multi-process approach and if infeasible – introducing the process coordination hub concerning the processes implemented simultaneously. In this point, insightful project management literature can be helpful, which defined the Project Management Office concept. Similarly, Process Management Office could be established. To some extent, a function of process coordinator in companies are performed by the ERP class systems. However, in case of bureaus, offices or administration, those are used in lesser extent. Last but not least, another method of handling the multi-tasking approach is the usage of analogy to the Critical Chain Multi Project Management concept, which shows how to manage project portfolios taking account of various bottlenecks in many project simultaneously (Araszkiewicz, 2017; Łopatowska, 2009; Steyn, 2002).

6. Conclusionu

The chapter presents the formation routes of procrastination phenomenon in both projects and processes. One of the main causes of this phenomenon is the usage of deadlines not only in project management but also in process management, in administrative and office processes in particular. An interesting observation is that the scale of time buffers in process operations can be much larger than in case of project tasks. This was proved with the analyzed example of serving the applicants of Dzierżoniów Employment Agency.

Based on the practical experiences and the project management literature, some methods can be recommended to handle the student syndrome and multitasking in process management. Following methods have been highlighted: immediate dates of starting the operations in processes, process management with the focus on bottlenecks, as well as the specific ways to deal with multitasking (Process Management office or the analogical concept to CCMPM).

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