

YOUTH

Deciding to beat procrastination

Help is at hand for those who have difficulty making up their minds, **Wang Qian** reports.

Staying up late, then having trouble waking up and leaving things until the last minute. All these are common human traits. Procrastination — prolonged hesitancy before deciding on a course of action — can be difficult to overcome, but a new service has emerged online to help people to tackle the condition and achieve their goals.

Describing himself as an “accountability supervisor”, Zhu Hecun, 21, who recently graduated from his e-commerce major at Xinyang Vocational and Technical College, opened his anti-procrastination store on e-commerce platform Taobao in 2015. For the past six years, the store has recorded more than 30,000 interactions. Fees range from 6 yuan (\$1) per day to 270 yuan per month. It primarily helps those in their teens to the middle-aged.

“Accountability supervisors not only help clients in time management, but also provide care, support and companionship. We are the people with clients’ best interests at heart,” Zhu says, adding that a supervisor, similar to an accountability partner, can help keep clients on track with various targets, such as drinking water regularly, going to the gym every day, cutting contact with former romantic partners and going to bed on time.

“Before the service, a supervisor will discuss a specific plan with a client via social media platforms. It includes deadlines, punishments and targets. Later, the supervisor will check in regularly to keep the client on message and get things done,” he says. If failing to follow the schedule, the client will receive punishment, like running or standing in the corner.

Zhu, from Xinyang, Henan province, found that business is seasonal and that most of his clients are students or people who live alone. Ahead of exams, students will increasingly contact Zhu over their study plans. To tackle this procrastination, supervisors usually check the clients’ progress every two hours or so. Before summer, many want to hire a supervisor to monitor their weight loss program. Clients will send photos or video clips of every meal and exercise undertaken to their supervisors, according to Zhu.

There were just three interactions in the first month after Zhu established the service, but the store now has hundreds of clients a month looking for accountability partners. This indicates the scale of habitual hesitation.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, procrastination is defined as the practice of putting off impending tasks due to habitual carelessness or laziness. A 2019 survey by the China University Media Union found that about 97 percent of college students procrastinate and 27 percent of respondents admit that such behavior decreases productivity. About 95 percent of respondents felt regret for their procrastination.



LIANG LUWEN / FOR CHINA DAILY

“This is why my business has kept expanding. Many people want to change, but their own willpower is not enough; they need a little push from others,” Zhu says and smiles.

Supervising strategies

In Zhu’s eyes, a good supervisor needs to be part coach and part cheerleader. As well as being non-judgmental, they cannot be too nice or too rigid and demanding.

Only taking three days leave since his store opened, Zhu works to a demanding schedule, often putting in more than 18 hours a day with dozens of alarms set in his smartphone.

“It is not an easy job. It requires long hours, patience, self-discipline and communication skills,” he further explains. His part-time supervisors are mostly female and they are

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Zhu Hecun, 21, from Xinyang, Henan province, who opened an anti-procrastination store on e-commerce platform Taobao in 2015

adept, he says, at encouraging people.

Nian Hui (a pseudonym) is a white-collar worker in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, and has been a part-time supervisor at Zhu’s store for two years. From her experiences, she concludes that a supervisor cannot really change someone, unless

they themselves want to.

Before every task, Nian must have a thorough, open and honest discussion with her client to help make a plan, covering schedules and the method for checking in.

Once the plan is set, she will try to get to know a client’s habits or char-

acteristics in the first couple of days.

“You must have a sense of when your clients may lose their way and how you can best cheer them on,” Nian says.

Client Ma Zhen has used Nian’s service for more than 400 days and his goal is to become a fluent English speaker in three years. With two years to go, Ma feels confident and motivated under Nian’s supervision.

“Procrastination is the thief of time and we are trying to retrieve that time for our clients,” Zhu says.

Searching self-discipline supervisors on Taobao, dozens of stores come on screen. The trend has made national headlines, some of which have been viewed more than 10 million times on micro-blogging platform Sina Weibo.

Yu Benqin, majoring in network engineering at Wenzhou University in Zhejiang province, has also seen the increasing demand to overcome procrastination among young people. He opened his first anti-procrastination store on Taobao in 2018 and has since opened two more, with monthly revenue reaching more than 100,000 yuan.

Yu says that paying a little cash for accountability partners means a better chance of success.

Emotional regulation

According to Psychology Today, a US magazine, procrastination tends to reflect a person’s struggles with self-control. For habitual procrastinators, who represent approximately 20 percent of the population, “I don’t feel like it” takes precedence over their goals or responsibilities, and can set them on a downward spiral of negative emotions that further deter future effort.

Timothy Pynchyl, an associate professor at Carleton University, in Ottawa, Canada, found procrastination to essentially be “an emotion regulation strategy” — a self-regulation for failure.

Psychologists have identified various causes and effects of procrastination — fear of failure and excessive perfectionism leading to poor emotional regulation and decision fatigue.

Before tackling the issue, psychologist Liu Chunting suggests that looking into the hidden roots for procrastinating will make it easier to tackle.

“Everyone knows that procrastination can have negative effect on life, yet we keep doing it because it helps us avoid stress or discomfort, albeit temporarily,” Liu says.

Psychiatrist Li Songwei, a former lecturer at Tsinghua University, echoes Liu, noting that, when the reason behind it is identified, it will help people break the old habit and stay motivated and dedicated in the long run.

Li says that for people trapped in procrastination, having someone to support and accompany them through their tasks can help rebuild self-control.

On social media platform Douban, a group on time management and self-regulation has been established, attracting nearly 40,000 followers, many of whom share their plan, covering study, exercise and bedtime. Livestreaming their study routine has become increasingly popular among the younger generation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to many students having to study remotely.

No matter what means people choose to beat procrastination, Zhu thinks that the key is persistence.

“Research shows that it takes 21 days to fully form a new habit. As long as people stick to a new routine for three weeks, they are likely to be accountable to themselves in realizing their future plans,” Zhu says.

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