

Parkinsons Law

Idea In Short

Parkinson's Law, a concept that has profoundly influenced our understanding of productivity and time management, states that "work expands to fill the time available for its completion." This simple yet powerful observation was first introduced by Cyril Northcote Parkinson, a British historian and author, in 1955. Originally published as the opening line of an article in *The Economist*, this principle later became the cornerstone of Parkinson's book, "Parkinson's Law: The Pursuit of Progress."

Cyril Northcote Parkinson, a British naval historian and management theorist, first introduced this concept in a humorous essay published in *The Economist* in 1955 and later become the focus of one of Parkinson's books, *Parkinson's law: The Pursuit of Progress*.

The law's simplicity belies its profound implications. Parkinson illustrated this with a whimsical example of a woman whose only task for the day was to send a postcard. Despite the apparent simplicity of the task, the woman managed to fill an entire day with related activities, from finding the card to debating whether to take an umbrella on her walk to the mailbox.

Parkinson's Law – work expands to fill the time available for its completion – means that if you give yourself a week to complete a two hour task, then the task will increase in complexity, so as to fill that entire week.. Parkinson's observations were rooted in his experiences within the British civil service, where he noticed a peculiar trend: regardless of the actual workload, bureaucracies tended to expand over time.

Psychological background

If you assign the right amount of time to a task, you gain more time and the task will reduce in complexity to its natural state. This approach works because most people, consultants

included, attribute to tasks more time than actually required. This is partly psychological because they want some wiggle room or buffer. So, the estimates are usually inflated, especially among junior consultants, who are taught to under promise and over deliver.

As a recent research finding shows, customers and clients are not particularly impressed or appreciate the extra effort you put into going above and beyond your promise. They do not appear to be uniquely ungrateful, just human.

Likewise, most employees consistently defy the unwritten rule - work smarter, not any harder. Despite the greater returns for the company, taking the smarter approach is not always appreciated or rewarded.

Understanding Parkinson's Law in Practice

At its core, Parkinson's Law highlights a fundamental aspect of human nature: our tendency to use all available resources, whether they're necessary or not. This principle applies not just to time, but also to other resources like money and effort.

Time Expansion

The most common interpretation of Parkinson's Law relates to time management. If we're given a week to complete a task that could realistically be done in a few hours, we often find ways to complicate or expand the work to fill the entire week. This phenomenon can lead to procrastination, inefficiency, and a false sense of busyness.

Budget Utilization

Parkinson's Law also applies to financial resources. When given a budget for a project, there's a tendency to use the entire amount, even if it's not strictly necessary. This behavior is often driven by the fear that future budgets might be reduced if the current one isn't fully utilized.

Effort and Complexity

Tasks tend to become more complex when given more time. What could be a simple, straightforward project might evolve into an unnecessarily intricate endeavor if allowed to expand unchecked.

Psychology Behind Parkinson's Law

Understanding why Parkinson's Law occurs requires delving into human psychology. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon:

Perfectionism and Over-preparation

Given extra time, many people tend to over-prepare or strive for perfection. While attention to detail is valuable, it can also lead to diminishing returns and wasted effort.

Fear of Idle Time

In many work cultures, being busy is equated with being productive or valuable. This can lead to a subconscious desire to fill all available time with work-related activities, even if they're not truly necessary.

Lack of Clear Priorities

Without well-defined priorities and deadlines, tasks can easily expand to fill whatever time is available. This lack of structure can lead to inefficient use of time and resources.

Procrastination

The comfort of having ample time often leads to procrastination. We tend to delay starting tasks when we perceive that we have more than enough time to complete them.

Implications

Many managers fall prey to the fallacy that something takes longer to complete should inherently be of better quality. To overcome such biases and fallacies, make a list of your tasks, and divide them up by the amount of time it takes to complete them. Then give yourself half that time and set deadlines for each task. This will make you see time as a precious resource.

Treat your self-imposed deadlines just as you would any client deadline. Use your instinct for competition to make this work for you. Also, look for any time fillers that lurk as trivial tasks, such as emails, social media and news feeds. These distractions usually keep you

from delivering real, good quality work. The addiction to emails and social media updates is because of the release of Endorphins when we receive a text message or notification.

Summary

To be productive, limit your time checking emails, social media, and news feeds. Instead of a leisurely 20-30 minute morning email check, give yourself five minutes. If you're honest, your emails follow the Pareto Principle i.e. about 20% of the emails you receive are important; the remaining 80% are absolutely useless and add no value, either to you or your clients. Establish the criteria to vet really important tasks from distracters. Keep revising your deadlines down to the absolute minimum; be conscious of the difference between absolute minimum and not enough time. You should be aiming for a job well done in less time; not a disaster that's going to cost you your clients. Working with task lists and deadlines will make you more productive by forcing you to prioritize your time! Set yourself tight deadlines and force yourself to prioritize your work. Great things can be accomplished when your priorities are in the right order.