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Kathrin Passig & Sascha Lobo

How to Get Things Done – Without a Spark of Self-Discipline

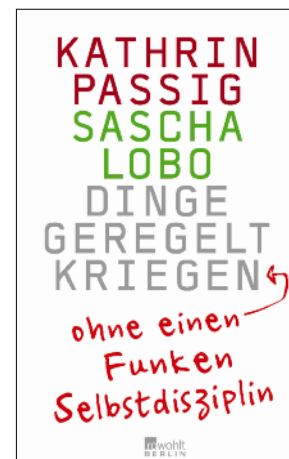
non-fiction

288 pages

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Everyone knows the feeling of finally intending to answer a letter you received weeks ago, only to find it, many additional weeks later, buried under a pile of unpaid bills. Or the dismay of discovering your tax return is months overdue, while a fading Post-It note on your computer screen reads: “Make a to-do list!!”

Some fifty percent of us are inveterate procrastinators. This book is for them. Passig and Lobo show how to escape the pressure of to-do lists and sort out your life without getting the sort of bad conscience caused by emails, requests, tasks, plans and duties – and without having to trick yourself into becoming something you’re not. A lot of things that stress us out because they demand to get done are, in fact, not worth a second thought. Passig and Lobo show readers how to organize life so as not to have to be organized yourself.



- A provocative, brilliant written hymn to lack of discipline
- Rights to the *Encyclopedia of Ignorance* were sold to ten countries.

Kathrin Passig & Sascha Lobo: How to Get Things Done Without a Spark of Self-Discipline
English sample translation by Katy Derbyshire (pp. 1-43)

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Introduction

We're writing this book as an act of self-defence. And because the world needs certain books, even if someone has to go to the trouble of writing them first. We want to give a voice to all those surviving between the entrenched positions of über-busy bees and absolute sloths. We do want to make ourselves useful – but under our own conditions.

The existing literature on the subject of 'getting things done' falls into two categories: one directly or indirectly accuses the already desperate that their problems are all their own fault, and presents solutions that guarantee success, provided you really pull yourself together, starting right now. The other category preaches slowing down, dropping out and defending your right to hang loose.

Technical progress is not a solution, we're told, but the root of all evil. The resigned message in the end is that we can only be happy pruning the roses and hand-pressing olive oil.

We want a different solution to our problems. There are lots of things we can't cope with, but that doesn't mean we don't want to take part in society. We don't want to learn energy-sapping tricks for squeezing into the tight corset of conventions between jobs and the job centre. We want to develop a new standpoint that bans the word self-discipline from our vocabulary as far as humanly possible. Self-discipline is like a chainsaw – you can chop down whole forests with it but you can also accidentally give yourself a leg amputation. With the aid of self-discipline, you can make yourself seriously unhappy in the long term with a lifestyle that doesn't suit you. It may well be necessary to do things you don't like every now and then – but firstly that's unproven and secondly you live a happier life if you keep the level of these activities as low as possible. In short, we want to organise life in such a way that we don't have to organise our lives any more. Our realistic minimum objective is that you read this book, don't change anything about your life, but feel better about it than before.

A word of warning beforehand: the advice in this book is not equally suitable for everyone. Nothing is equally suitable for everyone. But there is one thing that at least strongly suggests that the basic idea of 'Getting things done without a spark of self-discipline' is correct: if it wasn't possible for two individuals with black-belts in procrastination to get it together enough to write a whole book using the techniques presented here, you'd be looking at a blank page right now. Have a bit of a flick through, go on. If this book isn't two-thirds empty, we're probably right.

1. LEAD-UP

How it really was

In the beginning, God created nothing at all. 'There's plenty of time tomorrow,' he said, giving his beard a contented stroke.

On the second day, God said, 'Oh, there's still five days left,' and fell back onto the pillows.

On the third day, God did want to start dividing the light from the darkness, but by the time he'd made himself a coffee the whole day seemed to be over.

On the fourth day, God thought long and hard about getting someone else to do all the hard work of creation. But there was nobody else to do it.

On the fifth day, God had other things to do that were much more urgent.

On the sixth day, God wondered whether he could manage to get out of the whole affair. But he couldn't really think of any way to do it. He was omnipotent, after all, which makes most excuses sound pretty unconvincing.

Finally, at five to twelve on Sunday, God hastily chucked something together: water, earth, day, night, animals, stuff. Then God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, it was so-so. 'But for only five minutes' work,' he said, 'it's not bad at all!'

Wednesday in two weeks will do just as well

All you need to know about procrastination

Another word that's currently invading the German language and will considerably raise its previously low profile in the course of the next few years is procrastination. The term refers to a postponement of urgent tasks not due to lack of time, and thus all the more tortuous, in conjunction with manic self-distraction, taking any foreseeable and weighty disadvantages into full account.

(Max Goldt: *Prekariat und Prokrastination*)

Starting up is hard to do. A large proportion of the people out on the street, and an even larger proportion of the people you don't see on the street because they've got better things to do, put off all sorts of upcoming tasks. They don't take the trash out, they haven't got round to wallpapering the hall for months, they rarely open their mail, they don't finish this and that project, they don't call back and they should have done the books for the third financial quarter ages ago now. Yet they're not necessarily lazy, not all stupid, and not every one of them is evil, although these are the most frequent allegations they have to deal with. They just procrastinate – a nicer word for putting things off. *Cras* (tomorrow) is the root of the Latin word *crastinus* (of the morrow). *Procrastinate* (first documented in English in 1588) means literally leaving something for tomorrow. And tomorrow can be a very long way off. We've christened these people LOBOs, more or less coincidentally. The acronym stands for *Lifestyle of Bad Organisation*, or those who lead such a lifestyle.

Procrastination is not restricted to certain activities or tasks. In principle, anything can be put off; you can even refrain from doing things that are completely unavoidable. There can be a broad range of consequences. Often, nothing happens at all. In more extreme cases, the LOBO may end up standing outside their front door unable to open it, as someone acting out of cold rage on behalf of the disregarded system has had the locks changed. Or friends and colleagues take the steps they feel are necessary and leave them in the lurch. Or the electricity, gas, water, telephone and Internet are suddenly cut off.

These consequences are not unfamiliar to the procrastinator, and generally just as uncomfortable for them as for most other people. They know perfectly well that they could presumably prevent the damage by simply opening the pile of letters in the hall. Yet a strange force stops them from doing it. People often assume that force is fear. That may be the case sometimes, but it doesn't seem to be the general rule. The real reason for not doing something apparently necessary lies in human nature. Deep inside, we know that necessities are always a limitation that restricts our wellbeing. The pursuit of happiness is accompanied by the pursuit of a reduction of constraints to the greatest possible extent, so that even alleged necessities are put to question and practical tests. The outcome is an unconscious weighing up: should I spend a moment of certain unpleasantness now – or experience a less likely but possibly much more difficult moment later on?

The question of why this consideration so often ends in postponement has been keeping researchers from various disciplines busy for the past thirty years or so. Why this omnipresent subject hadn't been studied before that, and why scientists did discover procrastination in the end is an interesting question, which someone else really should look into. It may have something to do with the fact that moral judgements are not generally the ideal way to fast research progress. The history of medicine and psychology is full of examples of how the idea that people should just pull themselves together has prevented progress – depression, phobias, sexual deviation, anorexia, and even schizophrenia and autism were once seen this way, and not all that long ago, either. Perhaps procrastination had to be recognised as a phenomenon down to more interesting factors than just bad manners, before scientists were attracted to it. Over the past thirty years, at any rate, there have been some 700 academic publications on the subject. Particularly since the end of the 1990s, scientists have finally started experimenting and using questionnaires to find out more about procrastination activities in student life. Studies using relatively representative population samples are few and far between as they're much more difficult, but there are also some initial findings in this area.

The researchers agree that there are mountains of work being pushed around, at least in the western countries studied to date: 75 to 95 percent of all students state in surveys that they procrastinate at least every now and then, with almost 50 percent regularly putting off tasks. Procrastination activities take up approximately one third of students' waking hours. The situation improves after university, but about 20 to 25 percent of the total populations are still big-time procrastinators. There are no differences in this figure between the USA, Britain, Australia, Spain, Peru and Venezuela, although there are no comparable data for other countries. The research doesn't support the popular theory of 'Once you have kids you can't afford to put things off any more' – the presence or absence of children doesn't seem to play a role at all.

I can confirm that it doesn't get any better when you have children. Kids are the best reason to put things off, and are socially acknowledged as a justification for procrastinating or not getting things done. Anything I do manage is all the more appreciated. But the effect wears off and it's not really fair, because I've organised good childcare so I can go out to work. I've got another 13 years to put things off, until my last child leaves home. (Angela Leinen)

Women procrastinate just as much as men, married people just as much as unmarried people, and academics no more than anyone else. More procrastination goes on in companies than by the self-employed. It's hard to establish whether procrastination is on the rise as a whole, as firstly there are no historical data, and secondly, even if we did have better data it would be almost impossible to decide whether things are really being put off more and more, or the attitude to procrastination has changed. Conceivably, for example, it may now be easier than it once was to admit to procrastination problems. A tendency to procrastinate doesn't come and go like a common cold, but seems to be a fairly stable personality trait. Test persons who fill out the same procrastination test twice get similar results, even

if the tests are years apart. A twin study published in 2003 indicates that there may be a genetic component at play, as identical twins are significantly more similar in their procrastination habits than non-identical twins. Under certain negative conditions (mainly at university), people put more things off, but our procrastination behaviour doesn't change a great deal in the course of our lives. At best, we develop certain compensatory skills.

The research is still undecided on the causes of procrastination. That means we can all put together our own tailor-made portfolio of causes from the various explanatory models. They certainly all offer a better solution than 'procrastination is laziness!' But don't expect too much from the overview below. Recognising the causes for our own procrastination habits, or thinking we recognise them, is almost no help at all.

Procrastination is a bad habit

As behaviourists see it, procrastination is a process of 'operant conditioning': you drag your heels over something once or twice, notice that nothing bad happens, and are instantly transformed into an incorrigible procrastinator. It seems fairly obvious that this mechanism might work. But there is no evidence that procrastinators really are born like this. The fact that procrastination appears to be a stable personality trait would in fact counter this theory.

People who procrastinate are afraid of failure

Or success

People who procrastinate, the theory has it, do so because the task they are facing generates stress and fear. The psychologist and student counsellor Henri Schouwenburg, however, notes that people like to use fear of failure as an *excuse* for procrastination. He suspects that students who suffer from fear of failure tend to seek help from student counsellors and psychotherapists fairly frequently and are therefore overrepresented in the relevant literature. The opposite hypothesis that procrastinators are 'scared of success' is based on individual observations by therapists. On the other hand, if you wanted to steer clear of success it would be much less hard work simply not to take on any major tasks in the first place. Some researchers also argue in the opposite direction: people of an anxious nature get upcoming tasks out of the way as quickly as possible so as not to attract the rage of the authorities and their superiors.

Procrastinators are stupider than other people

Or cleverer

According to some theories, students who procrastinate a great deal are less talented than their peers and therefore try to avoid tasks that would be too much for them. Other theories have it that they are particularly gifted and have found out that they can afford to start work at the last minute. Neither of these two variants has been proved.

People who procrastinate are depressive

Or optimists

Some studies indicate a link between depression and procrastinatory behaviour. It's not clear from these studies whether it's all the procrastinating that makes people unhappy or the depression that makes them drag their heels on everything. The business psychologist and procrastination researcher Piers Steel explains: 'The link with depression seems to be related to low energy levels, which make many tasks more unpleasant.' On the other hand, an excess of optimism can lead people to overestimate their ability to make up for time-wasting just hours before the deadline.

Procrastinators are perfectionists

The surprisingly popular perfection explanation in brief: because we can't bear the thought of delivering imperfect work, we prefer to do nothing at all. Recent findings have proved this theory wrong – in fact, perfectionists tend to put things off slightly less than others.

Procrastinators are easily bored

Many studies indicate that boring or unpleasant tasks are put off more frequently. People who tend to put things off get bored more quickly than others, are easily distracted, more impulsive and more impatient. The economists David Ackermann and Barbara Gross found out that students procrastinate less when a task is interesting and requires various skills, when a prompt start is socially desired and rewarded, and when there are clear instructions. Fear, time pressure from outside, the perceived difficulty level and the length of the task, in contrast, had no influence on procrastination behaviour in this study.

Procrastinators are less ambitious

One of the oldest and now well-evidenced theories. There are studies that show that people who procrastinate a lot have less career success on average and earn less money than people who are better organised. Very possibly, they're not as bothered about that as you might first assume, as their personal benchmark for success is lower. In the film *Jackie Brown*, the weapons dealer Ordell Robbie berates his girlfriend Melanie: 'Goddamn girl, you gettin' high already? It's just 2 o'clock! You know you smoke too much of that shit, that shit gonna rob you of your own ambition.' His girlfriend argues back: 'Not if your ambition is to get high and watch TV...'

Procrastinators live in the present

Using the standardised Time Perspective Questionnaire, test persons can be categorised as past-oriented, present-oriented and future-oriented individuals. Studies show that future-oriented individuals tend to work more; they are more successful at school and university and keep to

deadlines. People who live for the moment place more value on interpersonal issues are more impulsive, take more risks and don't think a great deal about the future or the past. People from this group put more things off and prefer activities that pay off before the distant future. The studies don't provide an explanation of how these different priorities come about.

Procrastination is a symptom of attention deficiency

There is a statistical link between procrastination and ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder, which is often accompanied by hyperactivity (ADHD) and affects around a tenth of the population of the western world in some form or another. A survey among all authors of this book results in a rate of at least 50 percent for ADS, so we can confirm a link between the ADS symptom of being easily distracted and procrastination from our own experience. Other symptoms are also a veritable Who's Who of procrastination justifications: a short attention span and related forgetfulness, concentration problems, a lack of (mental) stamina, frequent switches between different activities and hyperactivity or fidgetiness. Nevertheless, it is controversial whether ADD really is a disorder or a social construct, and thus just a number of different, perfectly normal characteristics. Even your average computer game or office job calls for a series of activities that, viewed on its own, could be taken for a mixture of the above symptoms. But these are deemed positive under the label of multitasking skills, or even expected if you don't want to look like a freak. You'd look pretty stupid, after all, if you tried to explain to your boss that you didn't hear the phone ringing because of your wonderfully low distraction level.

People who procrastinate are more successful at reproduction

Behavioural research and evolutionary psychology have provided one of the most attractive explanation models: for animals, doing nothing is not bad manners but helps them to survive. Evolution ensures that animals don't do more than strictly necessary. Studies of energy-saving strategies among animals show a clear link between saving energy and reproduction advantages. For instance, the energy turtles save by simply lying around on the bottom of the sea later benefits the quantity and quality of their eggs. So far, however, no one has managed to prove greater reproduction success among human procrastinators. Perhaps there is actually a significant but previously ignored difference between humans and turtles.

Procrastination is a displacement activity

There is a phenomenon in the animal world that comes very close to procrastination: displacement activity; i.e. avoiding an action or decision that is actually urgently necessary. Displacement activity is regarded as irrational and a kind of hook-up error in the brain – rather comparable to the observation of procrastination in humans. The most frequently cited example was of cockerels that start pecking grain from the ground in the middle of a fight. Over many years, behavioural biologists explained

these phenomena using a version of Konrad Lorenz's instinct theory from the 1930s: the motivation for the action of fighting was approximately as great as the motivation for the action of flight, so the displacement activity of pecking grains was initiated. The Lorenz critic Hanna-Maria Zippelius established that apparently irrational displacement activities actually do have a function – namely a social or communicative one. By pecking grains, the cockerel is showing itself and others that the threat from his rival seems rather negligible. In addition, not throwing itself into the fight beak and claw but putting this activity off for a while can certainly save its life and is thus perfectly rational.

Unlike psychotherapists, economists assume that humans do not behave in ways that might damage themselves, but always attempt to maximise their own benefits. Their theories explaining procrastination are relatively new. The central idea behind them is time preference: 100 dollars you can have today is worth more than 100 dollars in a year's time, and sleeping in today is better than sleeping in tomorrow. In experiments, most people decide to cash in on the 100 dollars immediately, even if they could have 200 dollars in a year's time instead. (Which could be an explanation for the fact that saving and pensions aren't quite as popular as living it up and blowing all your money.) One example from the behavioural economists Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch – and for us at least, it's painfully true – is: 'Long before one actually agrees to write a book, for instance, the advantages of such an activity appear convincingly large, and the costs seem low. That's why authors agree to do such things. But as the deadline approaches, the cost-benefit perception alters. The authors see the costs more and more clearly (namely the time needed to finish the book), while the benefit appears less and less clear.' The following models are based on this idea.

Time discounting

As the available time is limited, people work on whatever appears to bring them the greatest benefit. Unfortunately, it's not always clear what that is. If a greater benefit accompanies task A and it has to be done by an earlier date than task B, the decision is easy. But in everyday life, it's often the case that task B is less beneficial but has to be done before task A ('first mend bike, then write dissertation'). Because the benefit arising from task A is so far in the future, it appears smaller than the benefit of task B. That leads us to neglect tasks with distant or no deadlines and tasks that only show their benefit at a later point, in favour of unimportant but urgent tasks.

Discounted expectancy

We are constantly having to decide between different activities. Our motivations for these decisions can be expressed in a simple equation: $\text{benefit} = (\text{likelihood of success} \times \text{value}) \div (\text{sensitivity to delay} \times \text{waiting time})$. The higher the benefit, the easier the decision in favour of a certain activity.

'Likelihood of success' describes how likely it is that the activity will lead to a certain outcome, while 'value' expresses how positive this outcome is. The waiting time indicates how long we have to wait

to enjoy the outcome of an activity. The longer this waiting time is, the less desirable the whole thing appears. Whereas the benefit of an activity such as ‘lying in bed watching DVDs’ hardly fluctuates at all, the benefit of other actions such as ‘getting down to work to earn money’ increases as the deadline approaches. At some point, the money-earning curve intersects the lying in bed curve; in other words, the benefit of the task to be done exceeds the benefit of all the other alternatives. That’s the moment when you jump out of bed and start work. It’s not yet clear, on the other hand, how the individually varying values for sensitivity to delay come about.

The dual system

In this model, every individual harbours a short-sighted personality and a personality that plans for the long term. The two of them have a lot in common but act independently. The short-term planning personality takes care of our wellbeing in the present and near future. The long-term planner is prepared to sacrifice current comforts for greater future advantages. What looks from the outside like the illogical behaviour of a single individual is, in reality, the completely rational behaviour of two different sub-personalities. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies indicate that different parts of the brain really are responsible for impulsive, quick decisions and for long-term planning. The respective roles of the two personalities, however, are not strictly black and white. The impulsive ego doesn’t always demand fast sex and unhealthy food, but is very much capable of steering the long-term ego, for example by spontaneously signing a contract for green electricity.

The fact that there are so many different models indicates that procrastination either comes from lots of different sources, or that science hasn’t quite got its head around the subject yet. Presumably both. And perhaps a few more years of procrastination research will find out that everything is completely different. For example like in this theory by Jochen Reinecke:

‘I moved to Berlin in 1995, to a very plain apartment in a modern building on Eisenacher Strasse, with indescribable curtains. Between 1995 and 2000, I didn’t manage to remove the curtains, let alone replace them with something more attractive. I moved house in January 2001. Sometimes I walk past my old apartment – the curtains are still there. They may well be procrastination progenitors.’

As it affects between twenty and ninety-five percent of the population, depending on the situation and the survey, procrastination can’t very well be an exceptional situation. It is in fact the norm. Should we then regard it as a problem at all – and if so, when? Where is the borderline beyond which a loveable slowcoach becomes a problem for herself and others? Can we simply declare the top five or ten percent of the procrastinators in each survey as sick? That would be rather random; not that we have any objection to randomness, but we shouldn’t make life all that easy for the psychotherapists. The student counsellors Jane Burka and Lenora Yuen state: ‘Procrastination in which one has settled down comfortably differs from problematic procrastination in the extent of how much of a *strain* we perceive our own procrastinatory behaviour to be.’ However, subjective strain and suffering is only

suitable as a defining category to a certain extent, as it's often enough generated by dubious opinions held by the people around us. A gay man living in Iran presumably feels under some strain, but that doesn't make him a case for a shrink.

The psychologist and student counsellor Norman Milgram (no, not the one with the Milgram experiment) draws the boundaries at the point where opportunities are wasted: 'When we procrastinate we waste time, miss opportunities, and don't live an authentic life.' Luckily, though, wasting time is not yet regarded as a sign that someone needs therapy, and nor is leading an inauthentic life. And at least in first-world countries, most people have so many chances at every turn that every opportunity we take rules out eighteen others. The procrastination researcher Clarry H. Lay, another psychologist and student counsellor, suggests 'prompt implementation of plans' as a benchmark for success in life. It's not a good sign, according to Lay, if there are always large time lags between making plans and realising them. Again, this symptom is so common that it's probably not suitable for identifying problem cases. In other words: even extreme forms of procrastination are fairly normal, if you take 'normal' to mean something that millions of other people do too.

5 completely ineffective means of preventing procrastination

1. **Terrifying scenarios.** The book *Procrastination and Task Avoidance* states: 'From our clinical experience, we can establish that confronting patients with horror scenarios works just as well as in other areas of behavioural change – very little to not at all. This is particularly the case if the procrastinator exhibits both low conscientiousness and high anxiety. Reprimands, pep-talks, threats and other amateur techniques appear to be just as ineffective.'
2. **Anxiolytic medications.** The procrastination researcher Joseph R. Ferrari and his colleagues report from their experiences with procrastinating students that anti-anxiety drugs 'generally exacerbate the situation, presumably by reducing anxiety too strongly and prompting a "don't care" attitude in the patient.'
3. **Psychotherapy.** The small amount of literature on the subject indicates that general psychotherapy approaches have no specific effect on procrastination tendencies. Short-term therapy seems not to help, at least with students. The prospects of success for specialised and/or longer-term therapy forms have not yet been investigated.
4. **Jettisoning habitual procrastination activities.** If you make a resolution to give up blogging, watching TV or twittering to devote yourself to your 'actual work', a new activity instantly evolves to fill the gap. In the worst case, that might be a multi-player online game. The sparkly new toy gobbles up all the available time, leaving none for your work. Whereas before, you had your previous habit more or less under control and managed to halfway organise your work around it, the new procrastination

instrument still has to find its place in your life. It takes weeks or months until you're capable of working at the same level as in the old days of blogging, watching TV or twittering.

5. **Doing everything differently, starting from tomorrow.** Everyone needs an average of four to five attempts to realise a plan, as we know from research into good intentions. But if it doesn't work out at the tenth try that's probably a sign that the entire approach is up the creek. Maybe a camel really doesn't fit through the eye of a needle. Maybe it'd be good enough if the camel just walked around the needle.

The whole world against us

When all around you ask too much

The news of his death didn't really surprise anyone in the Assemblée Nationale; he was mainly known there for the problems he was encountering in buying himself a bed. He'd decided on the purchase months before; but the realization of his project was proving impossible. The tale was usually told with a faint ironic smile; yet there was nothing to laugh about; these days the purchase of a bed does present enormous difficulties, enough to drive you to suicide. To begin with delivery has to be arranged, and then usually half a day taken off work, with all the problems that entails. Sometimes the delivery men don't come, or maybe they don't manage to get the bed up the stairs and you are obliged to ask for another half-day off. These problems recur for all furniture and domestic appliances, and the accumulation of difficulties resulting from this can already be enough to seriously unhinge a sensitive person.

(Michel Houellebecq, *Whatever*)

If you happen to own one of the most successful cell phones of the new millennium, a first-generation Motorola RAZR, please now attempt to turn off the button tones. Or switch on the button tones if they're already turned off. All other readers can use the time to finish reading this book and maybe even to write a book of their own afterwards. What we could do here is provide a tried and tested strategy, developed by experts but suitable for people of average intelligence, for dealing with the Motorola software. In a simple, illustrated thirty-step procedure, we could explain why the thing with the button tones works that way and what expert committees and scientists have come up with on the subject. But we could also proudly announce that button tones are much too unimportant and uninteresting to spend more than fifteen seconds on. We could refuse to put the self-doubt, desperation and anger over the millions of button tones not switched on or off down to the users' inability, reluctance or stupidity, and blame Motorola.

And while we're on the subject, isn't there an unpleasantly huge slice of Motorola in far too many areas of our daily lives? Yes, there is. The world is a complicated place. That's where it starts, but unfortunately that's not where it ends, as on top of all that people are constantly expecting us to just deal with it. And if we don't, we're branded losers, which is supposed to be our own fault as well. Putting a study plan together is complicated, installing a router is complicated, getting the papers together to rent a flat is complicated, redeeming your air miles is complicated, getting a replacement for a lost key cut is complicated, getting a receipt drawn up correctly to offset it against your taxes is complicated, and they have to invent a whole new word for dealing with public administration, because 'complicated' just doesn't go far enough for the latent threat to your mental wellbeing emanating from all those colourful letters you get sent.

The real drama, though, is that the whole world is against us. We don't just mean the whole complicated nature of the world; we could presumably deal with that on its own. What we're talking about here is the infinitely multi-layered number of simultaneous demands placed on us, which drives many of us to procrastination and fear of failure. Central Europeans have to be specialists in at least

everything under the sun if they want to hack their way through the jungle of constraints and possibilities of daily life. Procrastination is often a consequence of the world around us demanding too much. It's a natural reaction to a multitude of different demands to ignore most of them – and for a while all of them – and thus avoid work. This link between overloading and procrastination affects the whole of society; it's just that some people can deal with it better than others.

It's no shame to feel overloaded like this; in fact it's perfectly normal for the 21st-century human race. This is the core message that everyone ought to derive from a superficial analysis of the world around them. If we stick to Europe and don't include trappist nuns who have taken a vow of silence, we can assume that there are two types of people: those who feel overloaded, and those who don't notice they're overloaded. To take a closer look at the excess of demands in our everyday lives, we'll divide it into various areas below: technical, career, information and social overload; we'll turn a blind eye to emotional overload here, as it's far too complex.

Technical overload

Just to get things straight, we consider technological progress a blessing and believe there is a technical solution to many social problems. Unfortunately, many of these solutions have not yet been discovered, and if so they're hiding in among the mass of technical gadgetry. The classic example of everyday technical overload, the flashing 00:00 on technical appliances, is the one symbol of technical overload that is backed up by statistics. Across all gender and age boundaries, over 70 percent of Germans agree that instruction manuals are almost always hard to understand (*GEO* magazine, May 2005, representative survey carried out by the Allensbach Institute of Public Opinion Research on 2000 German citizens). And compared to setting up an email account on a cell phone or configuring the average DSL modem, setting the clock on a video recorder is as easy as ABC.

The digital revolution has made command of technology a prerequisite for normal participation in society. Even something as basic as taking the subway means you have to deal with appliances that would have had a young Leibniz doubting his logical faculties. Berlin's public transport system offers 117 different kinds of tickets, from the zone AB&C small group ticket (€22.50) to the zone A&B siblings' subscription (€160.00) to the CityTourCard Museum Island (€29.90). Technology, actually supposed to make life easier for us, does now deal with complicated tasks and reduces the everyday tortures of confrontation with handwritten texts, for instance. Far too often, though, it simplifies one area of our life at the price of complexity in another. The sheer mass of technologies we have to command becomes too much to ask, even though certain areas of technology are getting simpler. In the 1980s, the average telephone had about a dozen functions, but today's telephones offer hundreds and hundreds of functions, including several that are used to program other functions. In itself, this is a good thing, because it means that every user can adjust their gadgets to their own needs. In theory at least, as unfortunately – as we describe in the example above – usability is often out of step with the multiplication of options.

At the same time, there is a kind of ‘dialectic of progress’, as the effect of technological advances doesn’t automatically imply more leisure time. In *A Geography of Time*, Robert Levine writes: ‘Recent research indicates that farm wives in the 1920s, who were without electricity, spent significantly less time at housework than did suburban women, with all their modern machinery, in the latter half of the century. One reason for this is that almost every technical advance seems to be accompanied by a rise in expectations.’ Another reason is poorly designed technology. It fails to achieve its actual purpose of making our lives easier, and instead provokes huge amounts of aggression – and who among us hasn’t witnessed a technology-induced tantrum? For a whole generation that lived through the initially makeshift digitalisation of our lives, failing to make use of an appliance has become a natural part of our everyday experiences.

Career overload

Mainly via computer, the technical overload in our everyday lives intersects with career overload. Ever since you haven’t even been able to bake bread without the aid of information technology, a command of at least Office programs has become the absolute minimum for most jobs. Anyone who’s ever tried to set up a Word template that does what it’s supposed to do will know that with MS Office, the word ‘command’ is relative, and a constant and surprising source of overload in the workplace. Even after 15 years of feedback on the software’s shortcomings, the Word help function is an instruction manual that actually needs its own instruction manual. Although you have to admit that it’s unfair even to the complicated world of working life to pick Microsoft Word as an example. The fact that the complexity of tasks and demands is increasing in most jobs, and not just the classic office and highly qualified fields, is another consequence of increasing technology and specialisation in business and industry. But even more than imperfect technology, a mania for work across society, generally viewed as compulsory, means that many people feel overloaded and want to or have to escape this unnatural pressure in many different ways. (See the chapter ‘The inner Calvinist’.) The maxim of permanent industriousness leads to an incredible rise in token activities, as you can see without scientific studies by simply watching all the busy to-ing and fro-ing laden with papers – only interrupted by boring meetings preparing for other meetings – that goes on in the average open-plan office. Every newbie is immediately taken aside with a wink and shown how to never look like they’re doing nothing.

The self-employed are also often hampered by their own zeal, as they work far too much. One project is piled onto the next unchecked, poor coordination is compounded by the financial pressure to work a lot, and in the end it’s the classic self-employed professions like law and architecture that have the longest working hours. According to the professional associations in Germany, a 70-hour week is not unusual. For the self-employed, the great gift of being able to determine their own working time comes down to choosing the one day in the week when they don’t do overtime.

We can also see the overwhelming success of the counter-reaction as symbolic of widespread career overload: the French writer Corinne Maier's book *Bonjour Paresse*, which describes how to set yourself up a cosy, stress-free niche as an employee by making a pretence of industriousness to the exhaustion level. Mentally handing in your notice through pretending to work may well be an understandable reaction – but coasting through the working day with this surrogate employment is unlikely to make you happy with your job, unless you happen to write a bestseller about it and never have to work again.

Information overload

Since the invention of the mass media at the very latest, there has been clear evidence of information overload, and the entry of electronic media into our lives has raised the amount of data our brains have to process exponentially. In *Everything Bad is Good for You*, Steven Johnson tells us that even the average computer game now requires similarly complex reactions to flying a fighter plane under difficult conditions. To be precise, flying a fighter plane under difficult conditions is one of the most popular types of computer game. In recent years, networked tactical group battle games have arrived on the scene, for example what's called Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games / First-Person Shooters (MMOR-PG /FPS). And using them is just as complicated as the abbreviation. Even the relatively simply constructed and now classic online game Quake can have the unpractised tearing their hair out. Dedicated amateurs play Quake on two screens showing at least five graphic displays, are simultaneously involved in two to three different chats, and coordinate tactical issues with all the other players via headset using a voice chat. And that's not including communicating threats to the enemy groups via various channels, or even playing the game itself. The idea is that the different teams try to shoot each other down, sometimes using firing rates of ten shots per second. With four players on each team within a kind of arena, an impressive number of stimuli can arise, which it is essential to perceive correctly, analyse and process precisely and react to in the right way, in order to survive. At least in the game. Of course, such an extreme sensory overload also trains the players, making it easier for them to cope with everyday life, which has also become incredibly accelerated – at least according to Steven Johnson. The players expose themselves to this information overload of their own accord, even enjoying it – a clear sign that the same stress situations can have either positive or negative impact, depending on whether they happen deliberately and voluntarily or under some form of constraint.

The information overload is difficult to avoid, though, if you want to take part in life in society. Cell phones, the internet, the traditional mass media like radio, television, newspapers and mixed forms have multiplied the amount of information we are exposed to and have to react to every day. For every office worker with a computer, fifty emails in an average working day are not unusual, and instant messengers, chats and further developments on the theme raise the tide of information even higher. Without a doubt, there is primarily an enormous and particularly social benefit to all this. Yet

experience shows that we first have to spend a great deal of time learning how to handle new forms of communication. Until then, the individual – whether deliberately or not – teeters on the brink of information overload, at good times fascinated and at bad times provided with a perfect reason to make a tactical withdrawal and do nothing for a while.

Social overload

On average, every inhabitant of Germany has contact with almost a hundred people every day; this value differs between urban and rural settings and depending on age, but is on a constant upward curve. This is not explained purely by changes in society such as increasing fragmentation of various social groups like families or groups of friends, but also by our increasing mobility. The most important social change, of course, came with the internet: it is now easier to meet people and keep in touch with them. The stark rise in communications is mingling with the current favourite internet buzzword: community. Society is beginning to be entirely reflected on the net – with all its good and bad sides, just under different technical conditions. Social network services now make up a fair share of younger people's communication.

However, whereas these social network services simplify many social functions and fulfil social needs, they have opened up a world where it is easy to get into social overload. Keeping up friendships with a three-figure number of contacts in two or three different networks can end up filling whole days and evenings. And that doesn't just go for teenagers, but also for working people. Germany's most successful business network, Xing, has members with over 16,000 confirmed contacts. Assuming that a member like this spent a total of five minutes exchanging brief mails with each of their contacts, keeping in touch would take more than 33 working weeks, made up of five eight-hour days. Even career advisors who insist on the mantra of networking would probably agree that's going too far. If we dealt with social network friendships the same way as we do conventional ones, we could give up working and go into the friendship business full time. If we don't deal with them at all, all we miss out on is a world – sooner or later, too many social demands turn into too few social demands: communicative isolation.

Since the digital revolution, which first broke out in everyday life at the end of the 20th century and has reached (provisional) full bloom this century, we have been going through an astounding acceleration of our work, communication and private lives. Teenagers communicate solely through cell phones, laptops and game consoles at a speed that would have turned 1990s day traders green with envy. A study by the German Southwest Media Education Research Alliance found that young people send an average of well over a hundred text messages by cell phone a month – a form of communication that didn't even exist fifteen years ago. Dr. Edward M. Hallowell describes this behaviour, mirrored by many adults in the working world, in his book *CrazyBusy*. Dr. Hallowell specialises in Attention Deficit Disorder, and calls this phenomenon 'a world gone ADD'. He writes:

‘Once applicable only to a relative few, the symptoms of ADD now seem to describe just about everybody.’

In the 1980s, the American author and presenter Thom Hartmann thought up an explanation model for ADD, which is not necessarily to be seen as a scientific theory, but works well to make things clearer. Hartmann assumes that our predecessors were divided into two groups over many thousands of years: hunters and farmers.

The farmers had to keep their eyes and ears open all the time, to chase after any movement of an animal or to run away from it. At the same time, it wasn't worth running after a herd of buffalo for too long and wasting valuable energy. This explains the high short-term motivation that suddenly caves in at some point, making it difficult for hunters to follow longer projects through to the end. Out on the hunt, distractibility, uneasy sleep and a constant state of alarm were their best friends, helping them to survive.

The farmers were different; they had to take care of their fields every day. A sudden enthusiasm for two weeks of salmon tickling would have turned their agricultural concept on its head. Planning intelligence, perseverance and a sustained will to work were the weapons with which they championed their successes, not in battle but in the vegetable patch.

While Hartmann still assumed that we live in a farmer-oriented society and used his concept to explain the difficulties faced by many ADD patients, Hallowell maintains that a transformation has now taken place: a shift from a farmer society to a hunter society. Speed and the willingness to expose ourselves to stress are becoming more and more key through the accelerated working structures. In the worst but most likely case, we are expected to command the skills of both groups, including the speed and creativity of the hunters in our repertoire along with the constancy and solidity of the farmers.

So it's not just demands on us in terms of specialist knowledge and technologies that are increasing, but also in terms of expectations of our adaptability – we have to cope with more and more different tasks, demands and scenarios, or else.

If we don't go along with this active adaptation, we run the risk of blaming ourselves. ‘Other people cope with similar pressures,’ we sigh. But this ignores the fact that appearances and our inner feelings can differ considerably. Even apparently highly competent individuals suffer secretly at home under the bedcovers. All too easily and quickly, LOBOs conclude that overload and thus procrastination are down to them alone, and they sink into resignation although the sum of demands really is too high.

This self-doubt is just as widespread as it is false, in most cases. It only makes sense to blame yourself on one issue: every LOBO is responsible for seeking or creating surroundings that match their skills as well as possible.

A large part of the excessive demands from the world around us comes through a habit that problems have, which they have in common with people: they almost always take themselves more seriously than they are. As our lives have become more complex, it has become more difficult to perceive and categorise problems correctly.

It can help to try out what happens if you simply don't react to something generally regarded as absolutely inconceivably important. One great training area is official letters, which have almost certainly been scientifically colour-coded to prompt immediate concern in the recipient. A test subject from Berlin, let's call him Sascha L., carried out such an experiment involuntarily. The initial situation was as simple as it was unpleasant: he estimated a traffic light to be just sufficiently green while driving a vehicle. The camera mounted at the junction, however, was of the opposite opinion.

There followed a cascade of letters in a crescendo of threat, which Sascha L. only actually viewed approximately one year later, due to his pronounced ability to leave letters unopened. The first official letter contained a photograph, the quality of which rather resembled a daguerreotype. Due to his distinctive facial hair, L. was nevertheless easily identifiable. Alongside the official evidence of his guilt, the letter contained a demand that the vehicle holder should submit a statement on the accusation. Even if L. had opened the letter promptly, a response would have been unlikely; in this case, the ability to leave letters unopened was accompanied by an ability to leave open questions unanswered. In the subsequent letters, which arrived at an approximately monthly rate, the tone of the demand increased in stridency. Finally, the letters made unveiled threats of legal escalation; the phrases used by the official body are too unpleasant to be reproduced here, and would have to be reread in order to do so. The experiment appeared to be nearing its zenith with the force of law, and on opening the final letter L. was prepared to read that a judgement passed in his absence had sentenced him to fines and imprisonment, expecting to be led away in handcuffs only hours later. Instead, the letter stated that the case had been dropped for lack of evidence. No fine, no points on his licence, no consequences; the case was dropped.

We can learn from this example that problems are rarely as serious as they take themselves, and that not reacting is sometimes the best reaction. Every statement made by the vehicle holder would have been interpreted as an admission of guilt – or the official body would at least have realised that someone was dealing with the matter. Problems are like ugly, three-legged dogs: they come to those who take care of them, and then they stay for good, even if you shout at them every day.

(Sascha Lobo)