What we do to avoid doing jobs we don't like

By Tiffany Markman   5 May 2011

Sometimes I have a freelance job to do and I can't bring myself to get going. Luckily, this happens rarely. But when it happens, I'm always blown away by the wide range of weird, random, unnecessary things I'll condescend to do - especially 'workish' things - to avoid actually starting the project in question...

1. Do my (ugly, ugly) filing
2. Archive my emails
3. Organise my job board
4. Label client job bags
5. Tidy my desk
6. Write an article (a free article, for a column. Yes, it's marketing, but...)
7. Clean out my purse
8. Do a fruit-'n-veg shop
9. Repack the office fridge
10. Play with my iPhoto albums

And the list goes on...

The 'workish' things

The problem is that almost all of these things, bar the last few, look and feel like work - or, at the very least, admin/marketing. As Seth Godin explains,

> " *More and more, we're finding it easy to get engaged with activities that feel like work, but aren't. I can appear just as engaged (and probably enjoy some of the same endorphins) when I beat someone in Words With Friends as I do when I'm writing the chapter for a new book.* "

I realised the extent of the problem recently when I had a big, scary job looming that I didn't really want to do (the client was hard work, the industry foreign and the brief non-existent), but that I didn't want to turn down.

I dreaded getting started, so I made timing plans and designed project scope spreadsheets. With coloured cells. I mailed the client; I toyed with the first few phases of the prep. I did a million workish things that I didn't need to do, but that made me feel productive. I flailed about until it was *vrek*-urgent.

And as I contemplated unpacking the dishwasher, washing all the fruit in the house, pruning the basil plant and painting the nursery, I began to wonder about the things we freelancers do to put off certain projects. So I did what I always do when I have a bit of time on my hands. I opened the floor:

Others' outlets

> *This morning I was so desperate to avoid the two articles I have to write by Thursday that I finally got round to tidying my office - something I've been putting off for a year. Already thrown out two giant purple garbage bags of rubbish and have amassed a huge amount of recycled paper for my little one to draw on. I told myself it was because I was looking for the PIN/PUK codes for my two Vodacom modems, but in truth I just didn't want to face the day.*

- L

> *Tweeting. All my other non-deadline work. Invoicing. Meal planning, shopping, cooking. Absolutely have to make Nutella ice cream right now!*

- G

> *Play Scrabble or Word Twist online. Rearrange wines in my wine cellar; read Facebook (constantly); do exactly this... respond to non-essential, non-work-related emails so that I don't have to work...*

- N

> *Put on my running shoes and go for a hike. Plunge into household activities: doing laundry, brushing cat hair off couch, grocery shopping, baking muffins, or staring out the window in the hope that motivation hits me with a hammer.*

- M

> *The funniest thing I ever did - at varsity when I was supposed to be studying - was wash the leaves of an indoor plant with a wet lappie. It was only halfway through that I realised that it only seemed important because the alternative was to park my bum on the chair and study.*

- K

Internal distractions

Now, clearly, distractions are a big problem for the self-employed, self-managing freelancer - because they waste precious (billable) time.

But external distractions (arising from our environment: phone ringing, doorbell chiming, kid whining, fire starting) are pretty much out of our control.

The ones to worry about, the ones that kill me, are the *internal distractions*. The ones that I make up:

1. I should check my email.
2. I wonder what's happening on Twitter.
3. I need to write a blog post. Now.
4. I'm dying for a snack.

And these are the thoughts that start me off, so that I land up doing - or prepping for - every other non-urgent job on my books, *except* the one I should be doing.

The solution? To be completely honest, I don't know.

I guess I should only take on work I love, even when the money's fabulous. But the problem with that is that sometimes, I *love* the work I think I'm going to *hate*. Once I actually get going, and it starts to turn into something, that is.

So my plan is this:

1. As a rule, only take on jobs that you're really sure will appeal to you.

2. If you can't do that, force yourself to just *start*. Once you're past that initial 'getting started hurdle', it's amazing how much easier it is to get on with it.

3. Follow the 'two-minute rule' by [David Allen of Getting Things Done](). If you can do something (other than the work) in two minutes or less, do it. But if it requires more time and attention than that, add it to your to-do list, place a palm flat on each cheek and force your face forwards, to the screen.

As you've no doubt gathered, I wrote this piece rather than do something I'd been putting off. And I've taken considerably longer than the prescribed two minutes. So, off I go, to save the day. May you buckle down and do the same.

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

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