

How scheduling takes the fun out of free time

March 9 2016, by Erika Ebsworth-Goold



Researchers at Olin Business School found that ditching your calendar might lead to more fulfilling fun time.

Life moves fast, and finding enough hours in the day to get everything done is, at times, a seemingly impossible task. Scheduling, whether keeping a calendar, a to-do list or setting a smartphone reminder, is a saving grace for many people trying to accomplish as much as they can, as efficiently as they can.

But new research from Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, suggests it is best to ditch that to-do list when it comes to having fun.

Gabriela Tonietto, a doctoral candidate in marketing, and Selin Malkoc, associate professor of marketing at Olin Business School, conducted 13

studies examining how scheduling leisure activities affects the way these events are experienced. The research showed that assigning a specific date and time for leisure can have the opposite intended effect, making it feel much like a chore. Additionally, the researchers found that both the anticipation of the leisure activity and enjoyment from it decreased once it was scheduled.

"Looking at a variety of different leisure activities, we consistently find that scheduling can make these otherwise fun tasks feel more like work and decrease how much we enjoy them," Tonietto said.

"A few years ago, I was traveling back home to Turkey and was very excited to catch up with old friends and visit places I had missed," Malkoc said "To make sure that I would be able to do everything I want, I scheduled most of these activities.

"To my surprise, however, I soon started to feel reluctant and unenthusiastic at the prospect of the long-awaited reunions that I had scheduled," she said. "I began to think of each scheduled activity as more like an obligation, even a chore, rather than an enjoyable outing. I even made statements like 'I have to go get lunch with my friend.' Was it really possible for such fun and leisure activities to start feeling like work?"

"I came back and asked Gabbie to join me in studying this phenomenon scientifically," Malkoc said. "So far, all our findings indicate that scheduling indeed infuses leisure tasks with work-like feelings."

The fix: Tonietto and Malkoc propose a sweet spot, roughly scheduled leisure activities (on a certain day but with no set time, for example) to ensure that leisure is included in a day but still keeps some spontaneity, making it feel less like work.

"We find that the detriment of scheduling leisure stems from how structured that time feels," Tonietto said. "While we may tend to think of scheduling in structured terms by referring to specific times—such as grabbing coffee at 3 p.m.—we can also schedule our time in a rougher manner by referring less specifically to time—grabbing coffee in the afternoon.

"By reducing the structure of the plans, this rough scheduling does not lead leisure to feel more work-like and thus does not reduce enjoyment," Tonietto said.

While the research shows less scheduling is a good thing when it comes to fun, Tonietto and Malkoc stress people still need to hang onto their calendars.

"A host of past research has shown that scheduling and planning is important in getting things done," Malkoc said. "This work mostly examined non-leisure tasks, such as getting a flu shot. In our work, we find that this is also true for leisure tasks—that is, [scheduling](#) indeed increases our chances of engaging in them. But, on the flip side, we tend to enjoy it less.

"So it really is a balancing game, and it comes down to knowing what you will gain and lose when we schedule fun activities," Malkoc said.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

Citation: How scheduling takes the fun out of free time (2016, March 9) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-03-fun-freetime.html>

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