“IN THE NICK OF TIME”:
THE APPLICATION OF PARKINSON’S LAW TO THE RADIOLOGY DEPARTMENT SETTING

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Disclosures

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Learning Objectives

- To understand Parkinson’s law and its relationship with effort.
- To reflect on the various reasons that work inevitably tends to expand to fill an allotted time.
- To understand how Parkinson’s law may affect the workflow of radiology departments.
- To learn various time management techniques to overcome Parkinson’s law.
Parkinson’s Law

Parkinson’s law states that work will expand or contract to fill the amount of time available for its completion.

When *less time* is available for a given task, *more effort* will be expended to complete it.

When *more time* is available, *less effort* will be expended.
For the same amount of work, three different time limits are set: 2, 3, and 8 hours. Effort expenditure is highest when the time allotted is the lowest. When given a large sum of time, the work will easily expand to occupy all that time.
Parkinson’s law was first expressed by British naval historian and author, Cyril Northcote Parkinson, as the opening line in a satirical essay published in *The Economist* in 1955, and later as the focus of one of his books, *Parkinson’s Law: The Pursuit of Progress*. It was a commentary on his many years in the British Civil Service.
Why Does Work Expand?

- We do not look at how much time the task takes, but how much time we have.
- Procrastination: a recent article published in the NY Times suggests that procrastination is not so much a time management problem as it is a “way of coping with challenging emotions and negative moods induced by certain tasks — boredom, anxiety, insecurity, frustration, resentment, self-doubt and beyond.”
- A recent study published in the Journal of Consumer Research demonstrated that when more time is allotted for a given task, its perceived difficulty increases, thus leading to more expenditure of resources, like time. This, in turn, increases procrastination.
- We have a natural tendency to tackle urgent tasks over the non-urgent; simpler tasks over more complicated ones.
In radiology, there are many challenging tasks that can be a source of inefficiency or hinder overall productivity:

- **Difficult Studies**
  Radiologists may find themselves dwelling on challenging cases; or difficult cases may be left for the end of the day.

- **Quality Improvement**
  A QI project that is due in a year will take exactly that amount of time, although it could have been completed in much less time.

- **Resident & Student Teaching; Balancing Procedures with Case Volume; Faculty Meetings**
  Daily teaching, meetings or procedures may seem like a hindrance to productivity; however, when they are planned into the schedule and given a fixed amount of time, the remainder of the day's work will contract to fill the remaining time.
Ways to Overcome Parkinson’s Law

Plan Strategically
List all the given tasks you’d like to complete in a given amount of time. Group your tasks by their urgency and importance.

Set Self-Imposed Deadlines
Focus on how much time is needed, instead of how much time is given. The goal is a job well done in less time.

TimeBoxing
Setting a fixed amount of time to an activity is referred to as timeboxing, in agile principles. In a recent survey of 100 productivity hacks, timeboxing was ranked the most useful.

Pomodoro Technique
This productivity technique uses a timer to break work into short, 25-minute intervals, separated by short breaks.
Productivity Thieves: The Need for Accountability

Distractions, in all their forms, are our biggest productivity thieves--constantly checking and replying to emails, leisure feed scrolling, chatting with coworkers, etc. Accountability allows us to be honest with ourselves about how we are using our time.

Commitment Devices: attempt to enforce people’s voluntarily imposed restrictions until they have accomplished their goals.

- Ancient Chinese General Han Xin positioned his soldiers with their backs to a river, making it near impossible to flee, and thereby forcing them to attack the enemy head on.
- Software that disables internet access for a predetermined period of time
Conclusions

- Parkinson’s law states that work will expand or contract to fill the amount of time available for its completion.
- Work has a natural tendency to fill any amount of allocated time due to our tendencies to procrastinate, to gravitate towards more simpler or more urgent tasks, and the perceived anxiety of the given task, which is amplified when more time is allowed for it.
- Parkinson’s law is easily observed in every workplace. Radiology is no different, and contains many inherent opportunities for both productivity hindrance and improvement.
- Parkinson’s law can be overcome through simple time management techniques, like strategic planning, timeboxing, pomodoro technique, and commitment devices for purposes of accountability.
References


Zhu M. Why We Procrastinate When We Have Long Deadlines. Harvard Business Review. Published online August 29, 2018.