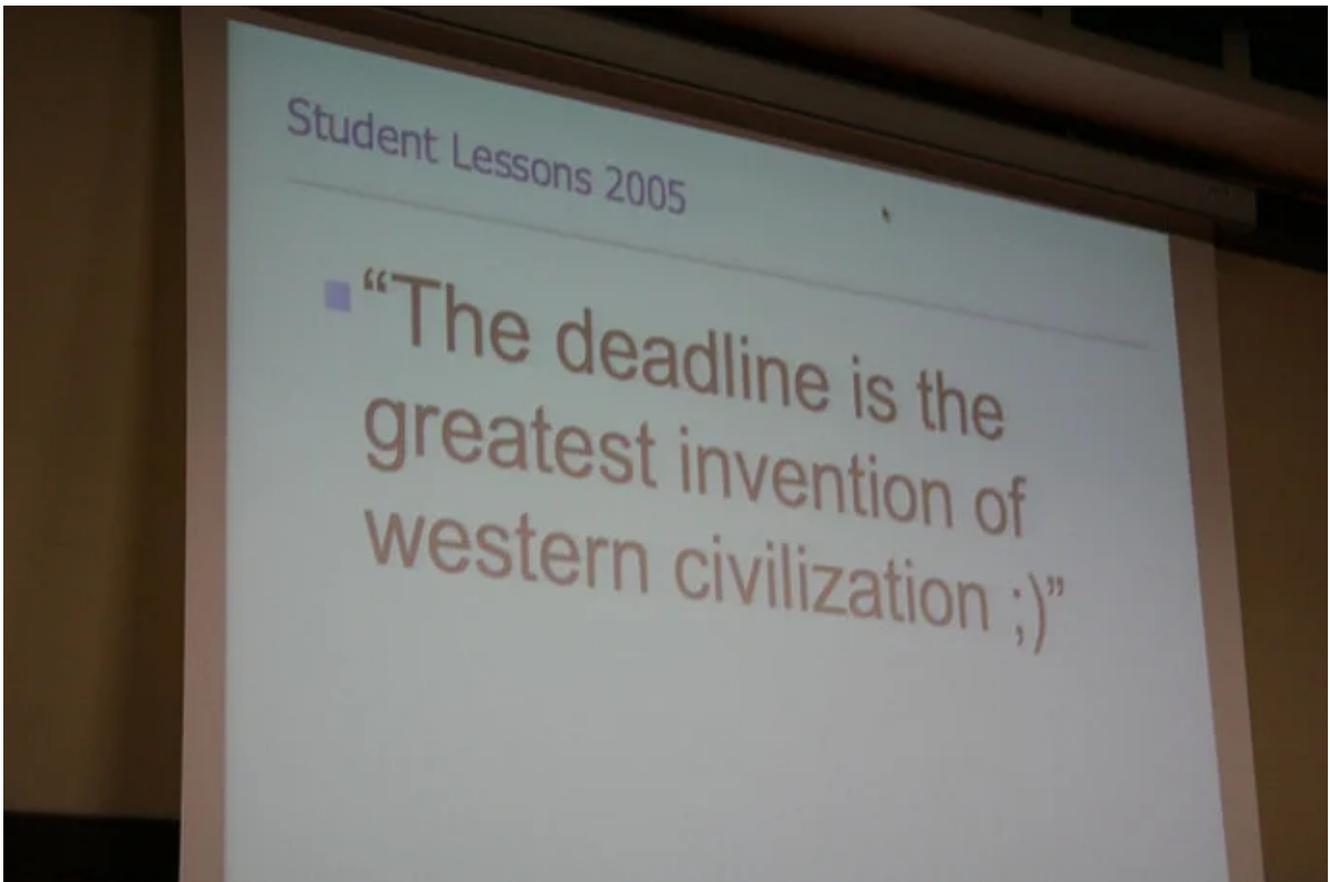# The Deadline Made Me Do It

A firm cutoff date is a surprisingly powerful motivator to finish what you've started

By Kristen Berman on November 9, 2016

Credit: Jesús Corrius *Flickr* (CC BY 2.0)

A social impact startup came to Common Cents Lab, our behavioral research laboratory, with a problem. They were struggling to get people to complete their multi-step online job application process. Our idea? We suggested they add a

deadline to the application. This, we hypothesized, could increase completion rates.

The founder was appalled. By giving customers a deadline, the company would have to deny service to people who missed that deadline. Denying service, the founder argued, was not a part of their company values.

To understand if the company would actually be denying service by adding a deadline, we need to understand why a potential customer would start an application but wait until later to complete it.

It's possible that the applicant might start the application and realize that they want to take time to diligently fill it out while carefully considering each step. Maybe they even want to have other people look at it and review it before they formally submit it. On the other hand, it's also possible that the person might start and stop believing they will have more free time in the future. This is called time discounting. The perceived cost associated with our effort diminishes when the task gets farther in the future.

To understand which explanation is most accurate, we partnered with another social impact company, the Kiva U.S. team at Kiva.org.

Kiva U.S. crowdfunds interest-free loans to small businesses in the United States. To qualify, applicants must fill out an application. If the application requires a small business owner to invest significant amounts of time, then adding a deadline should *decrease* the number of applicants. People just won't

have time to fill out the forms and they would miss the cut off. However, if people instead forget to complete it or are procrastinating, the deadline may be a helpful way to clarify their thoughts, create an action plan and complete the application.

We created two email responses. The first one had no deadline. Then we added a deadline—and 24 percent more people completed the application.

The results suggest that these new Kiva U.S. customers didn't necessarily need more time to complete the application; they just hadn't prioritized it. It's also possible that deadlines in and of themselves could be helpful. To understand this let's look at something very different than an online loan.

Researchers Suzanne Shu and Ayelet Gneezy tracked redemptions of bakery gift certificates. They found less than 10 percent of people redeemed a gift certificate that was good for two months. However, more than 30 percent of people redeemed a gift certificate that was good for only two weeks. Gneezy and Shu then asked people who did not redeem the certificate why they didn't. They found the most agreement with statements like, "I kept thinking I could do it later." The group with the shorter deadline window appeared to be most able to overcome this procrastination barrier.

Shu and Gneezy's research supports existing academic insights on time management. In 2002, psychologists Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch ran an experiment that put deadlines to the test. Literally. Half the students were given no deadlines and had to create their own deadlines and half had to adhere to deadlines set by the professor. The students without deadlines performed worse at the end of the semester than students with deadlines imposed by the professor.

The academic research, along with the Kiva U.S. team's research, suggests that we may often put off doing something, not because we need more time or have a strong preference to delay, but because we haven't made it a priority. Without a deadline, plans may not materialize into action even if there is intention.