Summary. Unrealistic deadlines don’t help anyone — and yet more often than not, employees avoid asking for extensions even when they know more time would help them do a better job. Through a series of studies with more than 4,000 working adults, the author illustrates how despite people’s assumption that they’ll be judged negatively if they request a deadline extension, managers are actually likely to rate employees who ask for extra time as more competent and motivated. As
such, she argues that managers should make an effort to clearly communicate when deadlines are flexible (since employees are likely to assume that they aren't), and that when in doubt, employees shouldn’t be afraid to ask for extra time.

Studies have shown that deadlines are one of the most stressful aspects of the workplace — especially when we (or our bosses) overestimate how quickly we can complete a task, and then end up scrambling to meet an excessively tight timeline. And this isn’t just about feeling a little stressed. Time pressure due to unrealistic deadlines has also been found to have a significant negative impact on creativity, effectiveness, and overall performance.

What can be done about this seemingly unavoidable source of stress? The most obvious solution to an unrealistic deadline is to ask for an extension. Many deadlines are a lot less strict than they may appear, and some are downright arbitrary. In fact, my colleagues and I recently conducted a survey with over 1,000 working adults in the U.S. in which respondents reported that just under half of their important work deadlines were adjustable.

There are many reasons a deadline might be more flexible than it seems. If your manager asks you to submit a draft memo by the end of the week, for example, they might only really need it to be finished in time to be included in a report that’s due next month. While the deadline for the final report might be non-negotiable, the internal deadline for your draft memo is likely a lot easier and less costly to extend. In other cases, a deadline might not be tied to any external requirements at all. For instance, sometimes a deadline serves merely as a commitment device to encourage an employee to finish a project, and can be adjusted without negatively impacting anyone.

But despite the fact that it’s so often an option, many of us still feel reluctant to ask for additional time. My team conducted a series of studies with a total of more than 4,000 working adults to
explore the barriers — whether real or imagined — that keep people from asking for extensions, even when it could help them both feel less stressed and produce better work.

**Barrier 1: Fear of judgement**

In our first study, we recruited 900 full-time U.S. professionals from a wide range of industries and asked them to complete a writing task. We intentionally made it difficult to complete the task in the allotted time and gave the participants the option to request an extension at any point before the deadline expired. We told them that another participant would act as their manager: The managers would evaluate the quality of their work and decide whether they deserved to receive a cash bonus. We then told one group of participants that their managers would be notified if they asked for an extension, while the other group was told that their managers would not know whether they had requested more time.

Even though all participants were clearly instructed that their writing would be judged on merit alone, when they were also told that their managers would know if they requested an extension, they were 31% less likely to ask for one. Moreover, the participants who took extra time unsurprisingly provided longer, higher-quality written responses (as rated by other participants) than those who only used the originally allotted time. This suggests that employees are hesitant to request extensions out of concern that their supervisors will judge them negatively for doing so, and as a result, they forgo the chance to improve their performance in a manner that their supervisors would care about.

We verified these findings in a second study, in which we asked more than a 1,000 participants to act as supervisors and evaluate the writing tasks from our first study. Importantly, all the supervisors were told whether or not the writers of each written response had requested additional time, but they were instructed to rate the responses based on quality alone. On average, the supervisors again rated the written responses from participants
who had requested additional time as higher-quality, and they further rated those participants as significantly more competent and motivated than those who did not ask for extra time.

**Barrier 2: Assumptions about the importance of speed vs. quality**

In addition to concerns that asking for an extension will make them appear incompetent, our next study demonstrated that many employees also overestimate the extent to which their bosses care how fast they complete their work.

We asked 200 full-time employees and 200 managers to imagine a scenario with an adjustable deadline at work. We asked the managers to rate how much they would prioritize their reports’ speed versus quality in this scenario, and we asked the employees whether they would request more time, and how much they believed their managers cared about speed versus quality. We found that employees consistently overestimated the extent to which managers cared about completing work quickly, driving their hesitation to ask for more time. While there are no doubt some cases in which speed actually is more important than quality, our research suggests that those cases are a lot less common than most employees think.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that employees should *always* ask for more time. In particular, prior research suggests that both asking for more time after a deadline has already passed, and asking for extensions over and over again, can lead to negative supervisor evaluations.

Similarly, while some deadlines are easy to adjust, we found in another paper that asking for extensions on costlier-to-adjust deadlines can have negative consequences. That said, this research also found that even for these less-flexible deadlines, employees still tended to overestimate the extent to which asking for more time would make a bad impression.
So why do we make these faulty assumptions? Research has shown that people tend to optimize for metrics that are easily quantified, such as completion time, rather than more qualitative (yet often more relevant) measures of performance, such as how well-written or insightful the final product is. Managers and employees alike generally see time management skills as the hallmark of a top performer, and the ability to use time efficiently is widely viewed as a signal of competence, ability, and even social standing. As such, it is hardly surprising that many employees worry that asking for more time will make them seem incompetent and inefficient — even though our data shows that the opposite is often true.

**The solution: Clear communication**

Given these factors, it is important for managers to explicitly communicate whether deadlines can be adjusted. Instead of expecting employees to guess whether it’s okay to ask for an extension, managers should formalize policies that clarify when employees will be judged on the speed of their work, and when quality is more important. This could help employees worry less about seeming incompetent if they request a deadline extension, in turn improving both their mental state and the quality of their work.

Asking for more time won’t eliminate the myriad sources of stress that we all face at work. But encouraging employees to express when they are feeling overwhelmed, and to proactively ask for more time when they need it, can be a win-win for both reducing stress and improving performance. Most of the time, quality matters more than speed. When in doubt, ask your boss for that extension — they’re a lot less likely to judge you for it than you might think.

Ashley Whillans is an assistant professor in
the negotiations, organizations, and markets unit at the Harvard Business School School and teaches the “Negotiations” and “Motivation and Incentives” courses to MBA students and executives. Her research focuses on the role of noncash rewards on engagement and the links between time, money, and happiness. She is the author of *Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time & Live a Happier Life* (Harvard Business Review, 2020).