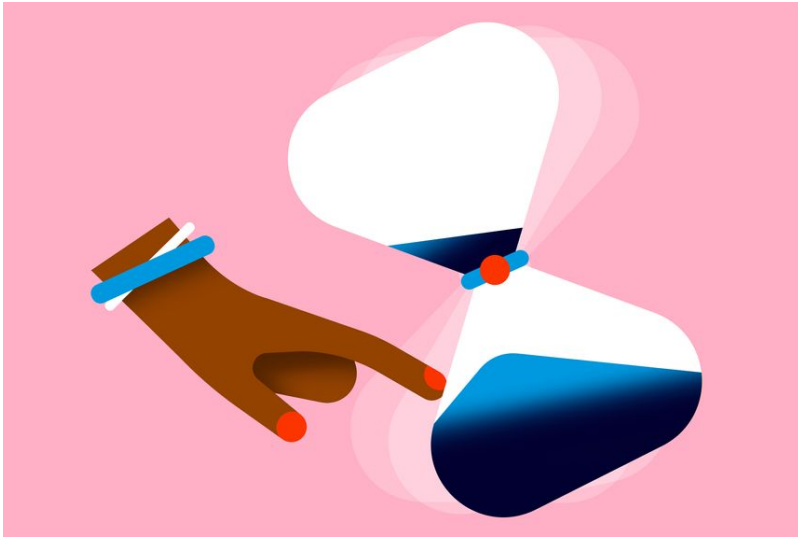


JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

# How Men and Women Treat Deadlines in the Workplace Differently

Women are less likely to ask for extensions. That hurts women—and the companies they work for.



Formal policies on project extensions eliminate gender differences in extension requests.

ILLUSTRATION: GIACOMO BAGNARA

*By Ashley Whillans and Grant Donnelly*

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Too much to do and too little time to do it. It's a feeling that skyrocketed during the pandemic, especially among working women, who last year reported completing an average of five additional hours of chores and child care a week versus men, undermining their happiness and productivity.

Today, as a result of these increased demands, 23% of employed women with children under the age of 10 are considering leaving the workforce, compared with 13% of employed men.

Along with additional responsibilities at home, women also tend to take on more administrative tasks at work, which contributes to their feelings of being stressed about time. But our latest research, finds there is another factor at play that is often overlooked: Women are less likely than men to negotiate for more time on adjustable deadlines at

work. Regardless of job status or years of experience, women reported feeling less comfortable asking for such extensions than men.

What is behind this dynamic? We found that women are more concerned than men about appearing incompetent and burdening other people with their requests. These concerns increased feelings of guilt and undermined women's willingness to ask for more time to complete projects and assignments.

To retain top talent, it is critical that managers understand this dynamic and encourage all employees—especially women—to negotiate for more time when deadlines are flexible. Here is some advice for managers, based on our research.

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- **First, let your employees know when a deadline is flexible.**

Many day-to-day work tasks are smaller tasks that contribute to a larger goal, and can often be adjusted with minimal or no costs to management or the company. For example, a manager may ask an employee to create an initial draft of a proposal by the end of the week for an event that's happening in a few months. Since there is extra time built into the proposal timeline, the employee's initial deadline for the proposal draft is adjustable. It is critical that managers communicate that.

- **Second, emphasize that asking for more time doesn't signal incompetence but rather a commitment to high-quality work.**

Although worries about appearing incompetent and burdening colleagues dissuade women from asking for more time, we found across our studies that such fears are unfounded. Indeed, our studies showed that women weren't judged more harshly than men—even when adjusting a deadline incurred a direct cost to the manager.

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What's more, we found that asking for more time could lead to better output. In one study of college students studying business, male students were nearly twice as likely as female students to request an extension for an assignment worth 20% of their final grade. Students who asked for an extension received grades that were 8.2% higher, on average. Because of their hesitation to ask for more time, female students' performance suffered.

- **Finally, enact a formal workplace policy on project extensions.**

In our research, formal policies that make clear employees can request extensions without penalty eliminated gender differences in extension requests and appeared to improve the performance of women.

With warnings of the great resignation in our midst, it is more important than ever that leaders help employees help themselves—by encouraging employees to ask for the time they need to perform at their best.

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