



Regrets and Wrongdoings of Omission - If Only I Had

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Few people in their dying days have ever wished they had worked harder. Yet having a healthy work/life balance is almost impossible to achieve if you truly enjoy your work. At best, you try to make the extra-long work days and working weekends exceptions rather than the rule. Then when measured over the long-term, you can hopefully see some resemblance of balance in terms of attention given to your family, community, faith, and self.

But in comparison with our ancestors, who in our contemporary western society has the right to complain anyway? Based on census data collected between 1880 and 1995, the average hours worked per week by the head of household has almost halved and leisure time available has almost tripled. Relatively speaking, we are truly a fortunate workforce.

Regrets still occur though. People still sacrifice their family in the name of their work. People regularly deal with the heartbreak of realizing that it is too late to do (or undo) something. Regrets exist in our personal and professional lives.

There are many sources of regrets. In the broadest terms, they fall under two categories - our wrongdoings of commission and wrongdoings of omission. Of the two, studies show that our wrongdoings of omission are the more regrettable. In other words, you are likely to be more regretful about what you haven't done and wished you had than about what you have done and wished you hadn't.

Partly to blame is our built-in "omission bias" that unconsciously influences us not to act. In a study on parents deciding whether to give their children a flu vaccine or not, parents were more likely not to give their children a flu shot when told the odds of their children dying from the flu shot was 0.05 percent, even though they were told their children's odds of dying were 0.1 percent if they didn't take the shot. They believed the odds of dying from the non-action alternative were double that of the action alternative, yet they chose non-action. Our fears hold us back even though not taking action is often much riskier than taking action.

Our preference to risk something bad happening due to inaction is reinforced in the workplace too. Employees are more likely to be held accountable for what they attempted and failed than for what they never attempted in the first place. While not very defensible from a results perspective, it makes sense given what we don't do isn't as easily observed or measured.

How many great new ideas, innovative products, improved processes, or prudent risks are avoided and left untried because of omission bias? How many opportunities to improve your organization come and go without action? How likely are you to forgo engaging your skills, knowledge, and talents in helping others? How often do you bypass the chance to improve yourself?

Unfortunately, as with most regrets, omission bias manifests when it is too late. You realize it when the opportunity becomes forever replaced with the consequence of inaction. To counter your omission bias, bring into your consciousness that which is truly important to you. Realize that you alone are responsible for where you spend your time. It is you that decides if something is worthy of doing now or is to be deferred until later. You are the one that lets the days turn into weeks which turn into months which turn into forever.

Consider the decisions you are making right now. Consider what improvements and opportunities you are missing out on right now. Think about areas in which you might help others now. Consider how you might get out of the rut of "busyness as usual" and make a strategic investment in yourself, your team, or your organization.



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These “strategic areas” probably aren’t the “A” priority issues which if you don’t do today or this week will cause significant issues. They are the “C” priority issues which you’ve had on your proverbial back burner for months or perhaps years. They are the strategic investments that if not done will only manifest in the distant future or gradually like the unfortunate frog who boils to his demise in the initially comfortable, but steadily heating pot of water on the stove. These are the decisions involving self-improvement, business improvement, offers of assistance, and those sensible risks that if you act on now could forever benefit you and your organization.

Make decisions now that will benefit you, your team, and your organization later. Know that even if you fail, you will have at least tried. You’ll never have the regret of not giving it a chance. You’ll never have to say, “If only I had taken action.”

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