

On Top of the Hour: Preference for Scheduling and Starting Tasks at the Beginning of the Hour

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Choosing when to start tasks can be an important aspect of task management in daily life. Do people prefer to start tasks at the beginning of the hour, that is, using clock time as a cue for their scheduling preferences? A first study showed a strong preference to start tasks on the hour, even in scenarios involving a cost to starting on the hour, in scenarios involving no other people, and across several forms of start preference measurement. A second study examined reports of real-life tasks: Participants identified next-day tasks ahead of time and then reported on these exact tasks 2 days later. Starting tasks on the hour was not linked with benefits for individual task progress, but starting a higher percentage of tasks on the hour over the day was linked with judging the day overall as having been spent more efficiently. In sum, these studies identify a preference for scheduling and starting tasks on the hour but show mixed evidence that this preference is beneficial for task achievement.

Public Significance Statement

Participants showed a strong tendency to schedule and start personal tasks at the beginning of the hour. Starting more tasks on the hour over the course of a day was linked with thinking the day had been more efficiently spent, though task progress did not differ for tasks that were scheduled or started on the hour or at other times.

Keywords: goal pursuit, scheduling, fresh start effect, subjective productivity, clock time

People complete many tasks a day, such as personal tasks (e.g., cleaning, exercising), work-related tasks (e.g., meetings with colleagues), and social tasks (e.g., meeting with friends; Fisher & Robinson, 2010). How do people arrange these tasks over the course of their day? In the present research, we examine the role of clock time cues in scheduling and starting personal tasks and events. Specifically, we test whether there is a tendency to prefer starting tasks at the beginning of the hour rather than at other times. For example, a person might plan to start mowing the lawn at 4:00 p.m. rather than at 4:15 p.m. or arrange to meet their friend at 10:00 a.m. rather than 10:43 a.m. Even in the absence of constrictions around the time that personal tasks should be accomplished, people might prefer to start daily chores and events on “top of the hour.” In the present research, we examine whether people prefer to start daily personal tasks on the hour and examine whether this tendency affects their task progress and productivity. These studies contribute to research on scheduling preferences (Kahn et al., 1997; Linville & Fischer, 1991; Ratner et al., 1999; Tonicetto et al., 2019) and test the

Fresh Start Effect (Dai et al., 2014, 2015) in a contracted, hourly, time frame.

Scheduling Preferences

Plans and decisions about when to start working on a goal or task are an important component of self-control (e.g., Freitas et al., 2002). Schedules might impact the likelihood that the task is actually worked on: For example, people tend to be more motivated to work on tasks starting at the beginning of a new week, month, or year (Dai et al., 2014, 2015). Conversely, scheduling suboptimally—for example, leaving too much downtime between tasks—can harm productivity (Malkoc & Tonicetto, 2019; Tonicetto et al., 2019). Surprisingly little is known about how people schedule their tasks over the course of the day. Research on personality differences in diurnal activation show that some people prefer to be active in the morning rather than the evening (e.g., Bauducco et al., 2020; Fischer et al., 2017) and thus might prefer to schedule tasks in the

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morning if they belong to the morning chronotype. As people generally perceive more available time in the distant future, they tend to prefer scheduling tasks into the more distant rather than close future (Zauberman & Lynch, 2005). People have also been shown to hold a preference for scheduling events based on their valence, for example, aiming to offset negative events with positive events (Kahn et al., 1997; Linville & Fischer, 1991; Ratner et al., 1999). Finally, time descriptions can affect task scheduling: Tasks tend to be scheduled earlier when the task start is described as days until start than when task start is described as a specific date (Jeong et al., 2023). Overall, information on how people schedule their personal tasks is scant and does not yet address the scheduling of start times for *daily* personal tasks. In the present research, we aim to test whether people use clock time cues in their planned and actual task start times.

Clock time describes the focus on external cues of time (e.g., clocks) rather than internal cues such as feelings (Levine, 1997; Sellier & Avnet, 2014, 2019). One important clock time cue is the beginning of each hour. Indeed, clocks and calendars emphasize the hours rather than the minutes of the day, making this time marker particularly salient. Thus, one prevailing principle of scheduling personal tasks in Western societies, which emphasize clock time (Levine, 1997; Sellier & Avnet, 2014, 2019), might be a focus of starting tasks at the beginning of the hour. In the present research, we examine the prevalence of preferring to schedule and start tasks on the hour using hypothetical events (Study 1) and real personal events (Study 2).

Fresh Start Effect

A secondary question of the present research is whether scheduling or starting tasks according to clock time cues might have positive or negative consequences for the person attempting the task. When it comes to goal pursuit or task progress, using clock time cues might benefit perceived or actual productivity. People might be more motivated to attempt tasks starting at the beginning of the hour, in line with the *Fresh Start Effect* (Dai et al., 2014, 2015). This effect refers to the phenomenon of experiencing the beginning of temporal categories as signalling an opportunity to begin a new regime of goal-orientated behaviour. For example, undergraduate students' gym attendance increases at the beginning of each new week, month, and year, as well as every new school term (Dai et al., 2014). Similarly, participants planning the start of their healthy eating regime also preferred to start eating more healthily at the beginning of time periods (e.g., beginning of the week and beginning of the month; Hennecke & Converse, 2017). Thus, people tend to schedule the beginning of goal pursuit at the beginning of temporal categories, following calendar time cues. The Fresh Start Effect has been shown for motivation at the start of the week (Dai et al., 2014; Davydenko & Peetz, 2019; Hennecke & Converse, 2017), start of the month (Dai et al., 2014; Hennecke & Converse, 2017), start of the season (Dai et al., 2015), or after major holidays and birthdays (Dai et al., 2014). The present studies extend this existing work by examining a shorter time frame, namely, the beginning of each *hour* as a signal for a new beginning during the day. However, it is important to note that not all daily tasks are goal-related activities. In the present research, we focus on the timing of any daily task rather than focus on goal-directed activities in particular (cf. Fresh Start Effect; Dai et al., 2014; Hennecke & Converse, 2017).

The Present Studies

To summarize, we proposed that:

Hypothesis 1: People prefer to schedule daily tasks to start at the beginning of the hour.

Hypothesis 2: Scheduling or starting daily tasks on the hour will benefit productivity.

In an initial study, we examined participants' preferred start times for hypothetical tasks, testing Hypothesis 1. We tested a variety of hypothetical tasks, such as tasks completed by oneself or with others and tasks that were described as having a cost to starting on the hour. We also assessed participants' start time preference in several different ways (via entering open-ended text, making a calendar time segment selection, selecting from a drop-down menu) to rule out that the preference is driven by aspects of measurement. In a second study, we asked participants to schedule start times for actual tasks they planned to do the next day and then report on actual start times, task progress, and overall subjective productivity that day on the following day, testing Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Together, these studies contribute to the literature by examining how clock time can affect scheduling preferences and by extending the study of the Fresh Start Effect to hourly time periods. Knowing more about factors affecting planned and actual task start times and potential consequences might improve daily task management.

Study 1: Scheduling Tasks

In this study, we examined people's choices for scheduling hypothetical tasks. We hypothesized that participants would schedule tasks more often on the hour than would be expected by random distribution of start times (Hypothesis 1). The preferred scheduled time might be affected by the way this question is asked (e.g., Jeong et al., 2023). To rule out that scheduling preferences are attributable to anchoring bias on the first presented or earlier option (e.g., LeBoeuf & Shafir, 2009), we assessed scheduled start times in four different ways, varying from open-ended text entry to selection of times on a calendar or selection of fixed minute intervals on drop-down menus.

Half the hypothetical tasks were described as personal tasks, and half were described as social events that required coordinating with others, as the inclusion of others has been shown to affect cognition about events and tasks (e.g., Mitchell & Silver, 1990). Additionally, half the tasks were described as having competing demands (money, comfort, time) that would have to be sacrificed to schedule the event on the hour. This design allows for a test of the robustness of the proposed on the hour start preference in light of a cost to scheduling an event to start at the beginning of the hour.

The data collection plan, the hypotheses, and the analyses were preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/NMJ_DYJ. Materials and data are available in additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/> (Peetz, 2025). The study was reviewed and approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board and adhered to American Psychological Association ethical standards.

Method

Participants

Three-hundred participant spots were posted on the crowdsourcing website Prolific Academic. Participants received \$0.75 in compensation. We screened open-ended attention checks and excluded two participants for not completing the check, as pre-registered. The final sample consisted of 298 U.S. participants, with ages ranging from 18 to 74 years ($M = 41.03$, $SD = 13.43$), and consisted of 42.6% men, 56.7% women, and 0.7% nonbinary. Participants were predominantly White (67.0% White, 14.5% Black, 6.1% of Asian descent, 6.1% Hispanic, 6.4% reported mixed or multiple ethnicities).

Procedure

After providing consent, participants read and rated four scenarios each, drawn at random from a pool of 20 scenarios. Participants rated only a subset of scenarios to prevent fatigue. Half the scenarios presented social tasks, for example:

You and a friend haven't seen each other for several weeks and you've agreed to meet at a coffee shop and catch up. You know your friend is easygoing and has nothing else planned for the day, but you want to firm up a time now. What time do you ask your friend to meet you at the coffee shop?

and half presented personal tasks:

Tomorrow is Saturday, and you've intentionally kept it free for some much-needed relaxation. Your main plan is to binge-watch the shows you've missed during the week. When will you start your TV show marathon?

Scenarios presented either tasks where there was no cost to starting on the hour (e.g., as in the previous two examples) or tasks where there was a monetary or other cost to starting on the hour:

Your plan is to catch up with your friends over a nice dinner and then to head to a play at a theater. You're on the website to book a table with two available reservation times—6:45 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. While both times allow you to make it to the play, the later one might result in a bit of a rushed meal. What time do you pick for your reservation?

Each participant was prompted to respond with their preference of start time in one of four different ways. The format of response was determined at random for each scenario that was presented to participants. The first response format was an ascending drop-down menu where participants reported task start times indicating the hour (i.e., 1–12), the minute in 5-min intervals (i.e., :00, :05, :10; ... , :50, :55), and selected "a.m."/"p.m." The second response format was a descending drop-down menu but showing the minute intervals in reverse order (i.e., :55, :50, :45, ... , :05, :00). This reversed response format was included to rule out anchoring bias. The third response format was an open-ended text box where participants were instructed to "Please indicate the time in this format: hh:mm a.m./p.m." The fourth response option was a picture of a daily calendar ranging from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m., which participants could click on to indicate start dates, with each quarter hour being a separate option that was highlighted when clicked on. After indicating their preferred start times for four hypothetical tasks, participants responded to an open-ended attention check and were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Across all scenarios, participants scheduled the start time of the hypothetical events on the hour in 50% of the judgements. This preference was evident across the ascending drop-down measure (50%), the descending drop-down measure (47%), open-ended text entry (59%), and pictorial calendar selection (44%). In all cases, the preference for scheduling the tasks at the beginning of the hour was greater than chance (e.g., where 12 intervals were presented, each interval had an 8% chance to be picked at random, or where every quarter hour was available as choice in the calendar, each quarter hour had an 25% chance to be picked at random), $t_s > 6.93$, $p_s < .001$. In other words, participants used the clock time cue of the beginning of the hour more than any other clock time cue. However, about half the tasks were scheduled at other times throughout the hour, presumably using cues other than the beginning of the hour to determine the preferred start date.¹

Next, we examined whether the type of task and competing demands affected this beginning of the hour preference. Because each participant judged four scenarios, we conducted multilevel regression analyses where judgements were nested within participants, aggregating across the measurement types. A multilevel regression with the variable indicating whether the task was social or personal showed no effect on the overall preference for starting on the hour by type of task, $B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(895.00) = -1.65$, $p = .100$. A multilevel regression with the variable indicating whether the task description included a cost to starting on the hour showed a significant effect of cost on the overall preference for starting on the hour, $B = -0.34$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(895.00) = -13.07$, $p < .001$, with on the hour start times being less frequently preferred when a cost to choosing this clock time cue was described in the scenario (33%) than when no cost was mentioned (67%). However, it is notable that even when the task description included monetary or other costs (being pressed for time, having to travel further, competing time demands), 33% of people preferred to start on the hour, despite this cost. See a breakdown of preference for on the hour scheduling for each hypothetical scenario in additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/>.

In sum, this study suggested a preference for scheduling tasks at the beginning of the hour, supporting Hypothesis 1. This preference was evident when choosing hypothetical start times for tasks that were completed by oneself, with other people, and even when start times on the hour came at a cost. This preference generalized across different ways of measuring task start preference—via selection of a time using drop-down menus, free text entering, and by interacting with a daily calendar—thus ruling out that the preference is driven by the way the judgement is assessed.

Study 2: Scheduling and Starting on the Hour

In the next study, we examined both scheduling and starting tendencies for daily tasks. We again expected an overall preference for scheduling tasks on the hour and expected that this preference would extend to actually starting tasks on the hour, as well (Hypothesis 1). This study also examined whether the tendency to schedule tasks on the hour could be shifted. We instructed some of the participants to consider scheduling their daily tasks off the hour

¹ Gender did not moderate preference for starting on the hour (see additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/>).

and expected that these participants would change their scheduling patterns compared to participants who did not receive this instruction. This allows us to examine the link between scheduled and started tasks more directly.

We also examined the hypothesis that scheduling or starting tasks on the hour might benefit perceived productivity (Hypothesis 2). We assessed productivity via reported task progress and via subjective efficiency, productivity, and satisfaction with task completion for the entire day. This study was not preregistered. Materials and data are available in additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/> (Peetz, 2025). The study was reviewed and approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board and adhered to American Psychological Association ethical standards.

Method

Participants

Three-hundred one U.S. Mechanical Turk workers were recruited for the Time 1 survey on a Friday and contacted again for a Time 2 survey 2 days later on the following Sunday. On both surveys, they reported on tasks they planned to do or did do in the intervening day (Saturday). Participants received \$0.75 in compensation for the first survey and \$1 for participating in the second survey. Participants who did not complete the Time 2 survey were excluded from analyses ($n = 131$).

The final sample consisted of 171 U.S. participants, with ages ranging from 20 to 89 ($M = 38.72$, $SD = 11.99$), and consisted of 50% men, 48.8% women, 0.6% agender, and 0.6% nonbinary. Participants were predominantly White (79.5% White, 5.8% Black, 6.4% of Asian descent, 2.9% Hispanic, 2.3% mixed, and 2.9% described themselves as “American” when asked about their ethnicity). The majority of participants were employed (73.4% were employed full time, 16.9% were employed part-time, 9.3% were not employed, and 0.3% did not respond to the question of employment).

Procedure

Time 1 (Friday). After completion of the informed consent and demographic questionnaire assessing only age, gender, ethnicity, and employment, all participants were asked to list six tasks they planned on completing the following day (Saturday). All participants listed at least four tasks, and 99% of participants listed six tasks. The types of tasks were categorized by two independent coders. This coding found that about half of the listed tasks related to chores (53.5%, e.g., “going grocery shopping”), with other tasks relating to personal projects or hobbies (22.4%; “yoga”), work (10.6%, e.g., “work on a programme”), or social commitments (5.6%, e.g., “call my mother”). See additional online material <https://osf.io/3h6bv/> on the Open Science Framework for an analysis of on the hour preference by coded type of task.

Participants were then randomly assigned to a control condition and a counter-preference condition. Participants in the control condition were given instructions to schedule the tasks they had listed: “Next, we would like for you to schedule each task into your day tomorrow. Schedule the time you plan on starting each of the tasks.” Participants in the counter-preference condition were given the additional instructions: “Normally, people prefer to schedule tasks on

the hour (e.g., 9:00 or 11:00). However, for tomorrow, we’d like you to consider scheduling tasks off the hour (e.g., 9:15 or 11:10). Please use the full range of possible times to plan when you will begin each task.” Participants used ascending drop-down menus to indicate start times. We also asked whether the day they reported on (Saturday) was a workday for them (“Will you be working tomorrow?”). Across participants, 43.9% stated that the next day would be a workday, 49.2% stated that the next day would not be a workday, 6.6% were unsure, and 0.3% did not respond.

Time 2 (Sunday). In the second survey 2 days later, participants were presented the exact six tasks they had listed at Time 1, including a verbatim quote of their own description of each task. For each task, they indicated the progress made toward task completion for each task yesterday (Saturday) using a slide bar from 0 to 100. Reported task progress ranged across the full scale, from 0 to 100. Participants then reported the time they had started working on each task yesterday using an ascending drop-down menu. Participants who did not remember start times were coded as missing (10% missing data).

Finally, participants reported on their subjective feelings about their overall productivity during the entire day. They reported how efficient they felt (“How efficient did you feel yesterday?”), how productive they felt (“How productive did you feel yesterday?”), and how satisfied they were with how much they got done (“How satisfied are you with how much you got done yesterday?”) on a scale from “not at all” (1) to “extremely” (7). These three items correlated highly with each other ($r_s > .85$, $\alpha = .95$) and were combined into one scale of perceived productivity (for analysis by item, see additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/>). Participants were then debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Across all tasks ($n = 1,024$), 50.5% were scheduled for a start at the beginning of the hour. Participants in the counter-preference condition were significantly less likely to schedule tasks on the hour (40.8%) than participants in the control condition (60.1%), $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 1,026) = 33.63$, $p < .001$, though the preference for on the hour start tasks was still significantly higher than chance in both conditions. Across all reports of actual start times, 44.2% of tasks were started on the hour. Participants in the counter-preference condition were equally likely to report having started the tasks on the hour (42.1%) as participants in the control condition (46.8%), $\chi^2(df = 1, N = 940) = 0.76$, $p = .382$, suggesting that shifting people to schedule the start of their tasks differently did not translate to actual different starting times. Table 1 portrays all means by condition.²

Consequences of Scheduling and Starting on the Hour

Next, we examined whether tasks that were scheduled or started on the hour differed from tasks that were started at other times. To account for the nested data structure (each participant reported on up to six tasks), we conducted multilevel regression models where within-participant variance in task ratings was accounted for. Task progress was regressed on whether the task was scheduled on the

² Gender did not moderate preference for on the hour scheduling or starting (see additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/>).

Table 1
Means by Condition (Study 2)

Outcome variable	Control condition		Counter-preference condition	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
% tasks scheduled on the hour	60.07 _a	32.67	40.83 _b	36.83
% tasks started on the hour	46.76 _a	30.80	42.08 _a	30.46
Progress reported across all tasks	71.71 _a	20.32	73.31 _a	22.12
Perceived productivity that day	5.11 _a	1.41	5.03 _a	1.46

Note. Means with a different subscript in the same row differ significantly at $p < .05$.

hour (1 = scheduled on the hour, 0 = scheduled at another time), whether the task was actually started on the hour (1 = started on the hour, 0 = started at another time), and the condition variable. None of the predictors significantly predicted task progress (see Table 2).³

Next, we examined if the overall pattern of scheduling and starting tasks on the hour affected subjective productivity for the day overall. We computed the percent of tasks that were scheduled and started on the hour, respectively, for each participant. A linear regression analysis regressed perceived productivity on the condition variable and the percent of tasks that were scheduled and started on the hour. Starting more tasks on the hour was predictive of greater perceived productivity that day and of reporting marginally more progress across all tasks (see Table 3).

Exploratory: Workdays Versus Rest Days

We explored the difference between participants for whom Saturday was a workday versus those for whom Saturday was a rest day. Few of the listed tasks were coded as explicitly work-related (19% for work days and 4% for rest days; see additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/> for more information), suggesting that participants planned mainly their personal tasks around a work schedule, even on days they expected to work. Participants for whom Saturday was a workday scheduled 47.0% of tasks on the hour and started 41.4% of tasks on the hour. Participants for whom Saturday was a rest day scheduled 52.0% of tasks on the hour and started 46.2% of tasks on the hour. Work and rest days did not

differ significantly for percentage of tasks scheduled on the hour, $d = .14$, $p = .392$, or started on the hour, $d = .16$, $p = .332$. In exploratory analyses, we analyzed the relationship between on the hour preferences and task progress and perceived productivity separately for those whom Saturday was a workday versus a rest day. We found that starting more tasks on the hour was significantly predictive of greater perceived productivity and average task progress on workdays but not on rest days (Table 3).

In sum, we again found evidence for a tendency to schedule and start tasks on the hour. Indeed, participants scheduled tasks on-the-hour five times more frequently than what would have been expected if tasks were evenly scheduled throughout the hour. We found mixed evidence regarding whether this tendency affects how people work on the tasks: While there was no difference for task progress between specific tasks that were scheduled or started on the hour versus at other times throughout the hour, those participants who started a higher percentage of their tasks on the hour across the day reported marginally higher progress across all tasks and perceived themselves to be more productive. Thus, it might be the pattern of scheduling tasks in a certain way over the course of the day that benefits task pursuit rather than schedules for personal tasks. Exploratory analyses suggest that starting more tasks on the hour might be especially linked to subjective productivity on days where individuals have other demands on their time, such as work.

General Discussion

Choosing when to begin tasks is an important aspect of time management. Across hypothetical and real daily tasks, we found a tendency to schedule and start tasks at the beginning of the hour. This clock time cued preference persisted even if there were costs to the starting on the hour (Study 1) and when participants were explicitly instructed to consider scheduling off the hour (Study 2). We found no improved task progress for tasks scheduled or started on the hour but found that when scheduling a higher percentage of tasks on the hour over the course of the entire day, participants *perceived* the day to have been more productive (Study 2). Exploratory analyses showed that this link was especially pronounced on days participants expected to work and may have had more demands on their time (Study 2).

Table 2
Multilevel Regression Models Predicting Task Progress by Task

Predictor variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Overall ($n = 1,024$ tasks)			
Condition	4.82	3.07	.118
Task started on the hour	−1.33	2.29	.563
Task scheduled on the hour	0.84	2.41	.726
Workdays ($n = 400$ tasks)			
Condition	−4.19	4.26	.328
% tasks scheduled on the hour	0.29	3.35	.931
% tasks started on the hour	−0.46	3.48	.896
Rest days ($n = 558$ tasks)			
Condition	−5.78	4.55	.207
% tasks scheduled on the hour	3.15	3.22	.329
% tasks started on the hour	−2.32	3.44	.501

Note. Condition coded as 0 = control condition, 1 = counter-preference condition. *SE* = standard error.

³ In a separate study, we replicated this null effect of recalled task start date and task progress; see additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/>.

Table 3*Regression Models Predicting Perception of Productivity and Average Task Progress by Participant*

Predictor variable	Average progress reported across all tasks			Perceived productivity that day		
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	β	<i>p</i>
Overall (<i>n</i> = 171 participants)						
Condition	7.03 (20.57)	.03	.733	−0.08 (0.23)	−.03	.744
% tasks scheduled on the hour	−0.34 (0.33)	−.10	.304	−0.002 (0.004)	−.05	.567
% tasks started on the hour	0.74 (0.38)	.18	.051	0.01 (0.004)	.18	.049
Workdays (<i>n</i> = 67 participants)						
Condition	2.08 (5.49)	.05	.705	−0.01 (0.33)	−.01	.967
% tasks scheduled on the hour	−0.09 (0.08)	−.15	.288	−0.01 (0.01)	−.19	.209
% tasks started on the hour	0.23 (0.09)	.33	.018	0.01 (0.01)	.28	.047
Rest days (<i>n</i> = 93 participants)						
Condition	1.48 (4.65)	.04	.751	−0.06 (0.34)	−.01	.869
% tasks scheduled on the hour	0.04 (0.08)	.07	.615	0.01 (0.01)	.11	.384
% tasks started on the hour	−0.02 (0.09)	−.02	.863	0.01 (0.01)	.09	.465

Note. Condition coded as 0 = control condition, 1 = counter-preference condition. Variables in model 2 were centred on line with recommendations for testing interaction in linear regression (Aiken et al., 1991). *SE* = standard error.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature on scheduling preferences (Kahn et al., 1997; Linville & Fischer, 1991; Ratner et al., 1999), showing a preference to schedule and start tasks at the beginning of the hour. More specifically, this research extends existing work on the Fresh Start Effect (Dai et al., 2014, 2015), showing that the motivation boost at the beginnings of time categories might not extend to *hourly* temporal categories (i.e., no benefits to task progress for tasks started on the hour vs. at other times). It might be that hourly time categories are too frequent to create a sense of new beginning. To facilitate a fresh start effect, each hour might need to be framed more explicitly as a new beginning or as temporal category (e.g., see Hennecke & Converse, 2017, on the importance of framing). In addition, the specific type of task might matter. The types of tasks elicited in work on the Fresh Start effect (Dai et al., 2014, 2015) are connected to larger goals (e.g., going to the gym is important for health and fitness goals), whereas many of the tasks in the present studies were daily tasks that participants may not be intrinsically motivated to complete but were described as chores (e.g., half of the self-described tasks were coded as “chores” in Study 2). In other words, the present studies might suggest that the Fresh Start Effect applies primarily to activities that are important to individuals and connected to their goals but does not extend to all tasks.

Knowing about the preference to start tasks on the hour might assist people to create schedules and to structure their to-do lists. For example, when scheduling classes (at a gym, in a school, or university setting) or scheduling work events, choosing an appealing start time might be beneficial. Thus, even when a previous event or class ended 10 min before the hour and transition between events is expected to take only 5 min, there might be a subjective benefit to a longer transition period so that the next event or class can start on the hour. Similarly, when picking restaurant reservations from available time slots or arranging meetings with friends, there might be benefits to subjective feelings of productivity even at the cost of small inconveniences. Indeed, Study 1 showed that almost half of participants preferred events that started on the hour over other times

when these events were more costly or inconvenient in some way (incurring waiting time or were financially more expensive).

Limitations

A major limitation of the present research is the reliance on self-report. In the study assessing actual task start (Study 2), participants reported task start from memory. Self-reported times might have included memory biases (Schacter et al., 2024) or rounding biases (Huttenlocher et al., 1990). It is important to note, however, that recall was relatively immediate (i.e., for the previous day) and daily recall has been shown to be reliable (Brown et al., 2007). Future studies employing objective observation of behaviour or tracking rather than self-report might address this limitation best. We have taken pains to test whether the *form* of self-report affected the preference to start on the hour (Study 1), ruling out that the preference is manufactured by the type of measurement of self-report (e.g., selecting always the first option in a menu vs. open-ended reports).

Task scheduling might not only follow a clock time approach (oriented at the time of day, e.g., *I will mow the lawn at 6:00 p.m.*) but might also follow an event time approach (oriented at prior tasks, e.g., *I will cook after mowing the lawn*; Sellier & Avnet, 2014). The present research is limited to examining scheduling preferences oriented at clock time cues. Preference to start on the hour is likely overall much lower in event time cultures or when focused on event time scheduling. Even in cultures that generally follow a clock time approach, scheduling formal start times for chores might be rare and asking participants to schedule their daily tasks might have been artificial. Thus, the present studies are limited in the extent of mundane realism they conveyed to participants. This being said, even chores and personal tasks might be scheduled outside the experimental situation. In a pilot study testing spontaneous tendencies to include start dates and times when planning tasks (*N* = 95; see additional online material <https://osf.io/3h6bv/> for details), we found that 82% of participants reported that they “sometimes” or “always” include the time they plan to start working on tasks on their to-do list. This suggests that scheduling task starts

might be something people do spontaneously when planning events and tasks, at least when writing to-do lists. More research is needed to examine task scheduling habits in more detail. A to-do list jotted down on paper might be less likely to include times for each task, whereas an electronic or paper calendar display often makes the clock time hour segments visually salient.

Future Directions

The preference for start times might be moderated by a number of additional factors. For example, there might be a “fit” effect, where on the hour preference is elevated for some tasks. People might be more inclined to schedule structured tasks on the hour (e.g., a meeting) versus an unstructured task (e.g., brainstorm an idea). People might be more inclined to schedule extrinsically motivated tasks they feel they have to do (e.g., household chores) on the hour compared to leisure activities that are intrinsically exciting that they want to do (e.g., tasks related to hobbies or goals).

Evidence of benefits of on the hour scheduling or on the hour starting of tasks was mixed—participants did not make more progress on tasks started on the hour than at other times but did feel overall more productive when a higher percentage of tasks was started on the hour. This might reflect a general benefit of more structured, predictable, or regular schedules. However, the types of tasks might matter in this link with perceived productivity, as well. Some types of tasks (e.g., a long overdue and much-needed chore) might create an overall greater sense of productivity than other tasks (e.g., watching a favourite TV show). While the coded types of tasks in Study 2 were not linked with perceived productivity (see additional online material: <https://osf.io/3h6bv/>), more research is needed to examine how scheduling preferences differ across types of tasks and how they interact with perceived productivity. It is also worth noting that scheduling each task or a higher percentage of tasks on the hour did not show any *detrimental* effects of on the hour scheduling and starting tasks. Future studies should examine the possible reasons or consequences of the tendency to start tasks on the hour in more detail.

A strong on the hour preference could conceivably detract from productivity as well. For instance, if a start on the hour is missed, people might decide to wait until the next full hour, delaying task start times and creating more downtime between tasks which could be experienced as unproductive (Malkoc & Tonietto, 2019). Future studies might examine the effects of *missing* scheduled task starts that begin on the hour versus at other times. There might also be subjective detriments to scheduling in a specific way: Scheduling events as starting after the hour might be perceived as “losing minutes” for the time spent on the task and lead people to feel less productive.

Sampling for all studies followed a convenience approach rather than selecting for specific characteristics or populations. Scheduling preferences might be more meaningful or pronounced for those that create their own day (i.e., students, self-employed, unemployed) or for those with a specific personality profile (e.g., highly conscientious people).

Conclusion

People prefer to start tasks on the hour. This preference does not promote their task progress but appears to make them *feel* they have spent the day more productively. The preference to start tasks on the hour might have consequences for task management and task

selection in people’s daily life. Being aware of this tendency might help people navigate their daily schedules better.

Résumé

Le choix du moment où commencer une tâche peut être un aspect important de la gestion des tâches quotidiennes. Les individus préfèrent-ils débiter leurs tâches au début de l’heure, en utilisant l’heure comme repère pour leur planification? Une première étude a révélé une tendance à commencer les tâches à l’heure pile, même lorsque cela impliquait un coût pour le faire, dans des situations n’impliquant pas d’autres personnes, et à travers plusieurs formes de mesure des préférences de commencement. Une deuxième étude a examiné les rapports sur les tâches de la vie réelle : les participants ont identifié à l’avance les tâches à effectuer le lendemain, puis ont rendu compte de ces mêmes tâches deux jours plus tard. Le fait de commencer les tâches à l’heure pile n’était pas associé à des bénéfices pour la progression individuelle des tâches. Cependant, initier un pourcentage plus élevé de tâches à l’heure pile au cours de la journée était associé à une perception globale de la journée comme étant passée de manière plus efficace. En résumé, ces études montrent une préférence pour planifier et commencer les tâches à l’heure pile, mais les preuves des avantages réels de cette préférence sur l’accomplissement des tâches sont mitigées.

Mots-clés : poursuite d’objectifs, planification, effet de nouveau départ, productivité subjective, heure de l’horloge

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