

# H4 Consulting Brief

## Culture of Urgency

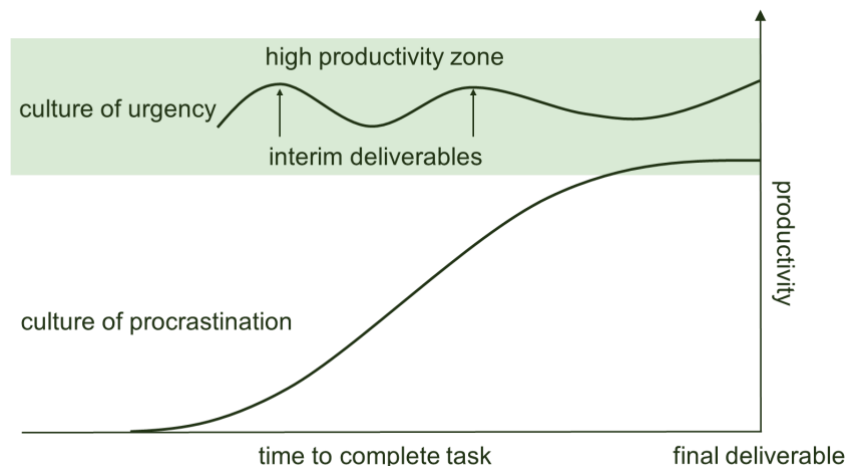
Without clear and pressing deadlines, publicly funded organisations can struggle to make and sustain significant progress on complex priorities. In an environment with rapidly shifting goals and public expectations that far exceed available resources, it can be easy for proximity of a deadline to become a proxy for priority. It can be a struggle to protect peak productivity for the things that matter most from the forces of mass distraction.

The work of publicly funded organisations is often characterised by evolving deliverables and flexible deadlines. Internal priorities adapt to external pressures, relegating some important work to a backburner, sometimes indefinitely. This reinforces perceptions that urgency matters more than importance.

People in publicly funded organisations often commit to doing high quality work. Without definite deadlines, they can get caught up in long tails of revision and review. With expertise distributed through publicly funded organisations and many stakeholders, feedback loops are also typically slow, perpetuating the idea that there is no rush to progress important work unless, or until, it has an urgent deadline.

Even the most important work tends not to be prioritised if it has a distant, arbitrary, or absent deadline. The lack of urgency creates space for procrastination, rework, and moving targets to align with progress instead of using targets to plan for progress. When inefficient practices are normalised, it becomes harder for people to work purposefully and promptly towards shared goals.

Workplace cultures that lack urgency also tend to reduce accountability. Instead of empowering people to push the highest priorities forward, productivity slows to the lowest common denominator. If productivity drops without a pressing deadline, then organisations, and the public, will miss opportunities for prevention and early intervention.



One way of raising the perceived urgency of the most important work, and thereby improving productivity and progress, is to define interim deliverables with clear deadlines. Setting, and strictly observing, interim deadlines help to create a culture of urgency around the highest organisational priorities. Making important work feel urgent helps to protect it from other work that seems urgent, but is actually less important and valuable over the medium to long term.

A culture of urgency is characterised by planning, accountability, and responsiveness, all of which tend to maintain higher levels of productivity. Robust planning and progress monitoring will help to maintain momentum despite some inevitable delays by defining contingency plans that can accommodate emerging issues and short-term disruptions.

A culture of urgency is not about making people feel more time pressure on all their work. It is about helping people to recognise and prioritise the inherent time pressure of the most important work, rather than the superficial time pressure of the most urgent work. A culture of urgency recognises that there is no time to delay the things that matter most, encouraging more efficient work planning and practices. Both individuals and organisations benefit when people are motivated to adopt more efficient processes.

When cultural norms shift from prioritising what seems most urgent to dealing urgently with what is most important, people are more motivated, empowered, and accountable. Interim deadlines enable the most important work to compete in, and win, the ongoing battle with the forces of mass distraction.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: [info@h4consulting.com.au](mailto:info@h4consulting.com.au)  
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