

Work Slower; It's Faster

Measure Twice, Cut Once – May 2022

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In December, 2021, Megan Fitzpatrick published a blog post¹ by this title for *Fine Woodworking*, and it resonated with me. I had intended to write a piece called “Take your time,” but Megan’s title gets right to the point. Surely every woodworker has taken a short cut that turned out ultimately to add steps and time to a project. In Megan’s instance, she was rushing to paint a tool chest featured in a video. Rather than prep all surfaces properly, she prepared the two surfaces visible to the camera and then painted the whole chest, knowing that she’d need to backtrack and strip the other surfaces, sand off machine marks, and repaint. She concludes “thanks to my hurrying, it cost me four more hours of work to get to the point where I was proud of the work. So slow down; you’ll get done not only faster, but better.”

It is often tempting in the shop to bypass a step, use the tool at hand rather than one more suited to the task, or to “make just one last cut” before ending a session. Or build a project from a rough sketch rather than a measured drawing, or gone to buy lumber without creating a cut list? As much as I’d like to believe that similar impulses are rookie mistakes that we outgrow, I all too often find myself reworking a part or running out to buy supplies. Why? All because for some foolish reason I didn’t take the time to get it right the first time. I’ll wager that we all have similar stories of haste making waste. I’ll also bet that many of us are slow learners on this score. After each incident, we resolve to slow down, be deliberate and methodical, and then time passes, and we take another costly detour.

Given the fast pace of life and the constancy of change, we all know that time and attention are in short supply. The impulse to lurch ahead to cross a real or imagined finish line is powerful on the job, in relationships, and in daily activities. Articles and books on effective management often emphasize, for instance, that thorough planning and analysis of options pay off in execution.

Similarly, when Total Quality Management was all the rage, its leading prophets told tales of companies looking to reduce costs by buying shoddy materials from a low-bidding vendor, only to then pay again either in lost business or replacement materials. Short-sighted decisions to shave time from a process subsequently demanded even more time to rectify errors. Do you remember the Fram oil filter tag line, “You can pay me now, or pay me later?”

Why do we make these myopic choices? Part of the answer might be wired into our brains. In his monumental book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman makes the case that our minds have two systems for thinking and action. System 1 is intuitive, speedy, and automatic. System 1 is the Fast Thinking of Kahneman’s title. We see a stranger’s face and instantly decide – without awareness – whether we want to approach or avoid. In many

¹ <https://www.finewoodworking.com/2021/12/21/work-slower-its-faster>

instances, automatic responses are highly functional, as when an off-cut flies at your face and you duck or swat it away. You don't work out a plan, you just react. And that instinctive reaction is a good thing, unless swatting your hand brings it into contact with a spinning saw blade. An experienced woodworker can look at a piece of pine and walnut and almost instinctively distinguish between them.

In complex decision situations, we invoke System 2, which is deliberative, slow, orderly, and effortful. Differentiating between birch and maple, white oak and ash might require more thought than pine and walnut. Building a dining room set demands plans, calculations, numerous decisions, and an orderly process.

Sometimes, though, we leave System 1 switched on in a situation that calls for System 2. Just when we ought to press Pause and consider consequences, we keep going on autopilot. Just possibly in that instant there is a little voice that says, "are you sure you want to do this?", and if you are lucky or wise, you pay attention to the little voice. Otherwise, you may replay it in your mind while you are spending that extra time correcting your mistakes.

To paraphrase Paul Simon's advice in "The 59th Street Bridge Song" (aka "Feelin' Groovy"):
"Slow down, you move too fast. You got to make the shop time last."