

When is “Good” Good Enough?



On the Job
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Somewhere, something went terribly wrong with the phrase “good enough.” You certainly would consider it faint praise if your boss said that your work on the last project was “good enough;” you’d like to hear that it was perfect. But are they mutually exclusive? Voltaire is credited with saying, “The perfect is the enemy of the good.” If Voltaire worked in a 21st century office environment, he’d be pointing to the unintended consequences of perfectionism at work.

You’ve all seen her; she’s the harried middle manager who stays in the office until 10:00 at night, editing and re-editing a report that her boss will only glance through. He’s the guy whose projects die on the vine because he can’t finalize a plan or finish the funding request. These office perfectionists operate on the assumption that there is one perfect answer/solution/format for the project they’re working on. A finished product that is “good enough” would never satisfy these workers. But is the search for the perfect solution the right approach?

First, let’s define “good enough.” A good enough product is one that has the right amount of information, used an appropriate amount of resources to develop, and meets the immediate needs of the customer who receives it. By definition, then, the report or the project must be complete, accurate, and coherent. “Complete” means that it provides what the situation requires; if a simple summary will suffice, fine. If a detailed analysis is called for, don’t stop until you’ve assembled it.

The challenge for some office perfectionists is that they lose sight of the customer’s need. Their own need (to be the best or the smartest) overrides what the project really calls for. Some perfectionists doubt their own instincts about what is good enough; they produce a magnum opus for every assignment. It’s like wearing a tuxedo to every event you attend, in the hope of never being underdressed. Office perfectionists also have a need to control their environment, and setting an impossibly high standard for reports and projects helps them feel like they – and not the customer – control what is considered good enough.

The consequences of this kind of perfectionism can affect the entire office. First, the perfectionist loses in productivity more than she gains in satisfaction. Spending many hours on a single project necessarily means that other work will suffer from lack of attention. The perfectionist may be spending time on projects that are not the boss’ priority, and may be skimping on projects that would gain her more notice. If the end user doesn’t seem to appreciate the amount of skill or effort that went into the project, the perfectionist may become resentful, ruining office relationships and job satisfaction. Projects may be delayed or fail altogether

because of a team member's inability to let go of the revision process. Managers who are perfectionists get the reputation of being micromanagers and difficult to work for. The extra time spent seeking perfection – and the stress it causes – may create problems in a worker's family life or health.

What's the solution for a perfectionist? How can you overcome an innate horror of "good enough?" First, try to make peace with your effort, your motive, the result, and what other people think about your result – these are not necessarily related issues. Focusing on what's needed just for this phase or this customer, can help. Asking the end user about his needs will put things in perspective; questions like "How much time will you be able to devote to studying this?" will help you balance reasonable effort with reasonable outcomes. Focus on what you did well in the project, instead of what didn't meet your standards. Perfectionists often have a laser-like ability to find the smallest mistakes; challenge yourself to find things you like about your work and the work of others. Finally, realize that true perfection is almost never achievable, partly because it's so subjective. Focus on doing your best, and trust that your best will be good enough.. ☆☆☆☆