



## **Christian Traxler – Hertie School of Governance**

Title:

**Deadline and Cognitive Limitations: Theory and Evidence from a Field Experiment  
(joint work with Steffen Altmann and Philipp Weinschenk)**

**Abstract:**

This paper analyzes the implications of deadlines in inter-temporal choices when people are subject to limitations in attention. We provide a simple theoretical framework for studying limited attention. An agent has to decide when to execute a task that requires costly effort provision. Postponing the task can be beneficial due to fluctuations in effort costs, however, 'doing it later' bears the risk that the task drops off the top of the agent's mind. We analyze how deadlines influence the timing as well as the overall likelihood of completing the task in time. We then test the model's key predictions in a randomized field experiment at a dental practice. Patients are reminded about the task to arrange a dental check-up appointment. The experiment exogenously varies the deadlines for contacting the dentist -- as well as the reward for doing so in time. In line with our predictions, the empirical results indicate that relatively tight deadlines encourage patients to make their check-ups earlier and at an overall higher frequency. Complementary evidence from a within-sample survey and an online survey experiment supports the notion that shorter deadlines may help people overcome problems associated with limited attention.