The central idea behind most time-management techniques is simple and logical: you need to become more efficient at finishing your work. Having done that, you’ll have time for a personal life. Indeed, the numbers are very convincing. Did you know that working a little more efficiently to complete one additional hour of work each day would give you an extra 20–25 hours each month? For most of us, cutting one hour of inefficiency a day is not that difficult to accomplish. Think of all you could do with that extra time!

If only it were that simple.

Interruptions, Procrastination, and Ineffective Delegation

Throughout the day and often without our full awareness, most of us experience interruptions and ineffective delegation. Allow me to illustrate each of these.

It is very difficult to resist a ringing phone or a colleague who pops into your office and asks, “Got a minute?” Yet these types of interruptions waste so much time that you must resist them. Not only does the interruption itself take you away from important work, but afterward there is a significant time-lag in regaining your previous level of concentration. The usual advice given to solve this problem is simple: whenever possible, do not allow important work to be interrupted.

Procrastination is such a common habit that some people have come to consider it an adaptive trait. A few lawyers I know think of it as an art form. This faulty logic is expressed when some of us say, “I work better under pressure.” In reality, it would be more accurate to say, “I work more efficiently when I don’t procrastinate. Unfortunately, that usually happens when time has run out and I have no choice but to stop procrastinating.”

Do you see the difference? By definition, you work more efficiently when you do not procrastinate. Time pressure forces you to stop procrastinating. Your peak performance, however, is likely to occur when you do not procrastinate and are not under time pressure. Not only is this preferable for health reasons, but it is also more likely to prevent mental errors and increase creativity.

An inability to effectively delegate work can also be a debilitating and time-wasting habit. Do you live by the rule that the way to get things done right is to do them yourself? Do you review everything your staff produces ad infinitum? Are you accused of being a perfectionist, critical, and controlling? If your answer to any of these questions is “yes,” you are likely an ineffective delegator. This means that you cannot maximize your achievement through the efforts of others, which in turn means that you are limiting the extent to which you can leverage your talents. In short, you will find it difficult to manage other people and are doomed to being a worker bee. That is, you are more likely to work longer hours and may be less likely to earn a higher income.

Easy to Say, Not to Do

Unfortunately, it’s not that easy to follow this advice. Although behavioral tips for interruptions, procrastination, and delegation are the subject of many books about time management, they are difficult to effectuate until you recognize the psychological changes you will first need to make. That is, people who cannot control these
Most People Need a Little Help

If, like most lawyers, you experience a considerable amount of time pressure and the psychological stress that comes with it, taking the steps I’ve outlined may have a significantly positive effect on your life. Even though the techniques I’ve listed are very effective, they can be difficult to implement without some further explanation and help. In addition, they require you to have the courage to face up to a few issues that you may not have thought about for a while. Finally, they require you to set aside a little time just for yourself; that’s the first step.

Amiram Elwork, PhD, is the author of Stress Management for Lawyers (http://www.amazon.com/Stress-Management-Lawyers-Professional-Satisfaction/dp/0964472732/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1254096534&sr=8-1) and director of the law-psychology (JD-PsyD) graduate training program at Widener University. He practices psychology in the Philadelphia area and devotes a portion of his time to counseling attorneys, providing consultation services to law firms, and conducting seminars designed to enhance the psychological skills of lawyers. He can be reached at aelwork@vorkell.com.

© 2010 by Amiram Elwork, PhD