

Time Management for Lawyers: A Psychological Perspective

By Amiram Elwork

This month's article is by Dr. Amiram Elwork. I discovered Dr. Elwork's book, Stress Management for Lawyers, in 1998 when I first came to work in the State Bar Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program. It was the first book that I read in my attempt to better understand the professional culture of the legal world and the stresses that are unique to this culture. His book was a great foundation for me in my quest to build on my existing knowledge and expertise to develop a skill set that equipped me to work effectively with this intriguing, and sometimes challenging, population.

If you're interested in diving deeper into your own understanding about the issues Dr. Elwork has outlined in this article and to understand his suggestions more fully, he is the keynote speaker and will answer questions at our second annual Richard Steinberg Memorial fundraising dinner on Thursday, April 15. All attendees will receive a complimentary copy of his book, Stress Management for Lawyers. Look for our ad in this issue of the Bar Journal. I hope to see you there!

—Martha D. Burkett,
Program Administrator, LJAP

The main complaint that the vast majority of lawyers have about the practice of law, and the one they think contributes most to their stress levels, is the amount of time they spend on work at the expense of all other activities. Among other things, constant workload stress leaves them with inadequate time for themselves and their families, which can have significant physical and mental health consequences. For these and other good reasons, the term “time management” is excellent at getting lawyers’ attention.

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 and participate in a number of very costly time wasters. The three that I find most useful to focus on are interruptions, procrastination, 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

behaviors commonly have unconscious motives that pull them in the opposite direction. Until you confront these motives, nothing will change.

For example, some people are reluctant to stop others from interrupting them because they are afraid of seeming offensive and, in turn, of being criticized. In addition, there are those who allow themselves to be interrupted because they cannot stand the suspense of not knowing what other people want and have a difficult time resisting their own curiosity. Interruptions make some of us feel important, and they help justify another major time waster—namely, procrastination.

A common reason people procrastinate is due to a genuine lack of interest in their work. You say to yourself, “This is going to be boring.” In turn, this leads to thoughts about your identity and whether your life is fulfilling. Such thoughts may trigger a variety of emotions, including anger, frustration, and guilt. Again, instead of confronting your thoughts and emotions in a constructive manner, you reduce the emotional pain by simply avoiding the boring task.

Another common emotion procrastination avoids is fear of failure. For example, a typical scenario might proceed as follows: You look at a file and say to yourself, “This is a difficult case.” The underlying implication is that you are going to fail, which triggers fear. Instead of confronting your original premise and all its corollaries (e.g., “I’m not a good lawyer”), you eliminate the emotional pain by avoiding the task. Fear of failure can also be an underlying reason for an inability to delegate effectively. People with this disability tend to exhibit perfectionism (fear of mistakes), excessive feeling of responsibility for everything, lack of confidence in others, need for control and fear of being controlled, and fear of competition from employees.

To change your time-wasting habits, you must first uncover the underlying psychological motives that prevent you from becoming efficient. Try disallowing your typical behaviors a few times and record your resulting thoughts and emotions. Once you fully understand the psychological dynamics involved, try to evaluate their validity.

For example, you might repeatedly ask yourself, “Is it really true that if I don’t respond to every interruption immediately, people will reject me?” After you recognize the illogic of your habitual thoughts and emotions, you can work on replacing them with more adaptive ones. After many repetitions, your old habits will dissipate.

It Won’t Get You a Life

I should mention one other thing: learning how to manage your work more efficiently will not necessarily result in your having more time for a personal life. Time-management techniques will only make you more efficient. They will not automatically result in your working less. If you are a workaholic functioning in a workaholic environment, becoming more efficient will simply mean that you will be completing more work than ever before. In fact, many lawyers already know this and tend to unconsciously resist becoming efficient time managers, fearing that it will result in an even larger load of responsibilities.

To get a life outside of work, you must delve into the psychological motives that underlie your workaholic habits in the first place and evaluate their validity. You have to develop a different set of priorities and understandings about who you are, what “success” means, and what you really want out of life. These have to be more than socially desirable words; they have to be a genuine expression of your true core values.

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](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