

Time Management

Still Fundamental

By Dawn M. Evans

While the methodologies lawyers use for managing time and improving efficiency have changed exponentially in the past decade, the fundamentals remain the same: lawyers must devise ways to track what needs to be done and when it needs to be done, and prioritize how those tasks are accomplished. Here are 10 tips intended to enhance your time and task management:

1. Update your to-do list daily. In years past, many lawyers maintained a to-do list in pencil on a legal pad. Today, that list might be on a smartphone, iPad, or laptop computer, but lawyers should have one easy-to-access place as a repository of all non-routine tasks—with “non-routine” being anything not so ingrained in your daily or periodic routine that reminders aren’t necessary. The list itself need not be in any particular order; its purpose is to keep tasks from falling between the cracks. As you age, you may find it useful to begin including things for which you previously did not need reminders. Crucial to your success is recognizing when your memory’s capacity has shifted, and timely acting on that recognition in a positive way.

2. Each work day, prioritize your three most important tasks. One sage lawyer advised his son, a newly licensed lawyer, to start the day with the goal of tackling the one thing he *least* wanted to do. This is a terrific strategy for preventing that one task from looming undone indefinitely because, for whatever reason, you don’t want to undertake it. It could be anything from returning a phone call from a difficult client to re-searching a legal issue you believe will favor the opposing party. The elder lawyer’s point was that the reasons for delaying completion of a task are the very arguments for finishing it as soon as possible; the thorniness of the matter will not improve with age. Other reasons an item may qualify for this short list on a given day may be the magnitude or time sensitivity of the endeavor. Identifying the items that take precedence is certainly half the battle. The other half is devoting time to assuring there is some movement on each task during the course of the day, which involves pushing other things out of the way as much as working on the task once the path has been cleared.

3. Delegate as much as possible. This tip is not an invitation to delegate critical thinking that *must* be done by a lawyer,

but instead recognizes that lawyers, as a group, have a propensity for wanting to control every detail, coupled with a perhaps inflated view that only they can do the job right. In truth, if legal and support staff are chosen with care and appropriately trained, many tasks that don’t require hands-on legal analysis and expertise can be delegated with sufficient instruction and supervision.

4. Review no less than weekly those items identified as past due. This tip clearly does not pertain to hard deadlines driven by statute or court rule but to self-generated timetables for completing projects and tasks. Understanding *why* projects and tasks remain undone is as important as knowing they haven’t been completed. Was the original timetable unrealistic? Should additional or different resources be allocated? Are other tasks not being appropriately managed? Regularly reviewing past-due items prevents them from progressing from being simply neglected to seriously unaddressed or altogether forgotten. If rule or statutory deadlines pass, whether inadvertently or not, three additional tips apply:

- Don’t panic. In most cases, there are solutions that may not be immediately apparent.

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- Be candid with the client about both the circumstances and available options.
- Consider whether notifying the malpractice carrier is appropriate to ensure a defense.

5. Keep a sacred, uninterrupted productivity hour. Whether you are a morning person or have your peak energy and creativity later in the day, establish and protect a set amount of time during your peak performance period each day that is reserved for work on tasks requiring your optimal mental efforts.

The good news is that applying even one suggestion will effect positive change in how work is being done.

6. Limit time spent returning phone calls and responding to e-mail. In the early days of e-mail, the belief was that it would save time by eliminating phone tag and allow communication to occur on an individual's own timetable. While phone tag may have decreased, clients who don't mind being contacted around the clock expect their lawyers to have 24-7 availability. Beyond self-limiting the amount of time spent reviewing and responding to e-mail, lawyers who bill hourly should ensure fee agreements clearly outline that time spent communicating—be it in person or by telephone, e-mail, or text message—is billable, lest a client believe that a lawyer's time spent on less formal modes of communication is free of charge.

7. Track all time, whether billable or not. Speaking of billable time, the reason for tracking all time is to educate

yourself about how you're spending *non-billable* time in order to evaluate whether those activities are valuable and necessary or simply distracting from things that should be given priority.

8. Train staff to do more complex work.

This strategy has the dual benefit of later empowering you to delegate more tasks to staff and enhancing their self-worth as valuable members of your law firm's team.

9. Stop controlling how work is done.

A manager's job is to wisely hire the right people and assure employees have the tools to perform their jobs. Once staff members are educated on their duties and equipped with the means to accomplish them, be willing to let them do what they've been hired and trained to do. If you are reticent to do so, reread tip no. 3.

10. Clean off your desk at least weekly.

For the rare individuals whose desks are perennially neat, this can serve as a reminder to use a surface cleaner. For the rest of us, it is a reminder that, despite the best tracking methods, there is invariably a piece of correspondence or other document silently aging at the bottom of a pile, unattended until the desk's owner undertakes a desktop cleaning.

Of course, 10 tips may be too many to digest, much less implement at once. The good news is that applying even one suggestion will effect positive change in how work is being done and—equally important—how you feel about it. ■



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