Time Management:
An Essential Skill for the Successful Lawyer

by Margaret Spencer Dixon, Esq.

Of all the elements everyone has to work with, none is more precious than time. Lawyers' abilities to manage their time directly affects the standard and quantity of their legal work, the quality of their service to their clients, and their own job satisfaction. Especially in the current competitive legal environment, lawyers' time management skills significantly affect the degree of their professional success.

In this series of articles on time management, we will discuss various techniques for managing time, paper, projects, and people (including yourself). The goal of these articles is to provide you with information that will help you produce high quality legal work effectively, efficiently, and with a minimum of stress. Specifically, we plan to: articulate the challenges of time management in order to provide a framework for you to analyze and improve your own time management skills; and outline specific, practical time management techniques.

Here are few common time management challenges and techniques for dealing with them:

Handling Paper

Dealing with the continuous flow of paper through your office is a fact of professional life. Who hasn't experienced that sinking feeling upon seeing the enormous pile in the in-box after only a few days away from the office? Without an effective plan for dealing with paper, it can easily get out of hand, cluttering your desk (and credenza, and shelves and floor), making it impossible to find the few truly important items.

Some suggestions for weathering the paper blizzard:

♦ The most important tool in handling paper effectively is your wastebasket. When deciding whether to keep or toss an item, be very selective about what you save. The key question should be, "Is there anywhere else I can find this information if I need it later?" It should not be, "Is there any chance I might want to look at this again?" It's probably safe to toss most of the paper that crosses your desk.

♦ Once you have decided that a document is worth saving, the question becomes, "Where do I put it so that I can find it again easily?" A key principle for filing systems is *keep it simple*. A personal anecdote is illustrative: a brilliant but self-admittedly disorganized partner at a firm where I worked confessed to me recently that his short-lived attempt at organizing his files ended when he was stumped by a document that logically could have fit in any of several files.

In other words, it's better to have a few fat files than many thin ones. Not only is filing easier (thus making it more likely that the documents will actually get filed, rather than languishing in the "to file" pile), but riffling through one of your files to find an item now and then will keep you up-to-date on its contents.

The best filing technique, of course, is to have a scrupulously organized, devoted secretary who never gets sick and who plans never to leave your employ. Failing this, however, it's a good idea to have at least a passing acquaintance with your filing system.

Telephone Use

While the problem of telephone tag has been somewhat lessened by the advent of voicemail, all of us have played that annoying but sometimes spirited game. The following suggestions should make it easier for you to make contact with your prey, as well as make your telephone a more effective business tool.

♦ When you leave a message for someone to return a call, include the specific time or times that you are most likely to be available to take the return call.

♦ It's easy to get sidetracked during a conversation, so take a moment before you place a call to jot down the topics you want to cover. Having a written agenda will prevent the "I'll call you back when I remember" syndrome. This technique is especially useful for recordkeeping purposes if you write this agenda in your

usual daybook, rather than on a random scrap of paper.

♦ If your office uses a voicemail system, learn how to send time-delayed messages to yourself regarding meetings and appointments throughout the day. Knowing that you will be reminded at a specific time to get to a meeting leaves you free to concentrate on the work at hand. Here is another self-reminder technique to ensure that you remember breakfast meetings: leave a message on your answering machine at home on the day before the meeting that tells you to stick a reminder about the meeting on the bathroom mirror (where even the most bleary-eyed can't miss it).

Procrastination

Everyone procrastinates sometimes. The insidious thing about procrastination is that only you know when you are really procrastinating. Getting a cup of coffee, stopping by a friend's office to chat, or even working industriously on a low priority project are typical methods of procrastination.

Some suggestions for dealing with procrastination:

♦ **The "start anywhere" approach.** Don't worry about finding the best place to start, just start anywhere. If you're a perfectionist, try starting with an obvious mistake (to be edited out later), just so you're not frozen by the idea that your first draft has to be perfect. It's far easier to get something down on paper and then revise it than it is to try to get everything exactly right the first time.

♦ **The "drive yourself crazy by doing nothing" approach.** Assemble all the materials for your project, arrange them in front of you on your desk, and *do nothing* for seven minutes (by the clock). Don't even write down any of the ideas that are sure to come to you during this period. By the end of the seven minutes, you'll be itching to start. Incidentally, the reason for the seven minutes is to make sure that you sit there for seven actual minutes. "Five minutes" or "10 minutes" tend to become concepts rather than actual time periods.

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