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Take Time To Make Time: Achieve laser-like focus and the quality of your time and your life will likely improve exponentially

By Diane Costigan

With the downturn in the economy, many lawyers have some extra time on their hands. What a perfect opportunity to work on establishing stellar time management practices that will help increase productivity when it is back to business as usual.

Although the suggestions in this article are simple, they are not always easy to implement. In fact, many are challenging because they often require a change in mindset – or even more difficult, a change in behavior.

When it comes to effective time management, you need to plan, plan and then plan some more. Not planning your time is like going food shopping without a list – you end up wasting time and money by buying things you do not need and forgetting things that you do.

Work As You Shop

Super-organized shoppers create a strategy that minimizes their time while maximizing their output. Based on previous experience and exact knowledge of what they need, they sort their coupons, know the best times to shop, and can locate the items on their list. By bringing a laser-like focus to their task, they're in and out of the store in record time. Their approach is similar to that of a heat-seeking missile – they are unstoppable in zoning in on their target.

The same strategizing can be done with respect to our day-to-day lives. How? By become an “efficiency expert” in training. The operative word here is “training” – an ongoing process of committing to be more efficient with your time. This can be difficult since it requires a generous helping of the “D” word – discipline.

Begin by taking a long, hard look at what is currently keeping you from being more efficient. Are you incarcerated by your email inbox? Feel too guilty to interrupt your assistant who talks your ear off? Can you never find what you are looking for because you forgot where you last put it? Many of you are used to recording your time – take this one step further by analyzing it.

Master The Three P's Of Planning

Once you know what gets in your way, you can plan more effectively. To help you, allow me to share the three Ps of planning.

Preparing: In order to plan effectively, you need to identify all of the things that will require your time. Particularly for busy lawyers, this information can come from many varied directions. Your calendar captures your meetings and appointments. Your work assignments will also inform time expenditure. You likely have many other roles and responsibilities that need to be worked into the mix.

- **Best Practice:** Use a to-do list. I am often surprised when I conduct workshops or coach clients on time management to discover how many people do not use a to-do list. Capturing all of the things you need to do in one place (not unlike a shopping list), ensures that everything gets done. Keep your list in a format that makes sense for you – on a simple piece of paper, your blackberry, the task function in Outlook, a journal, or even a series of post-it notes.
- **Tip:** Whatever format you chose, keep your to-do list with you at all times so that it is readily accessible when new information arises. Also, and this may sound obvious, you need to make sure to actually look at it several times throughout the day. Having a beautifully organized to-do list will be of little use if you do not consult it.

Prioritizing: Once you know all of the things you need to do, the next step is to figure out the order in which they need to be done. To determine this, ask yourself:

- Who needs it?
- What will it entail?
- When is it due?
- Where does it fit in with the other things on my plate?
- Why is it important?
- How much do I value this?

You may also categorize what you “want” to do, “need” to do and “must” do and recognize the related trade-offs.

- **Best Practice:** Each night or morning, identify the one or two most important things you need to do that day or the next. Even better, divide your day into chunks and then identify what is most important within those chunks. If something does not get done in one chunk, carry it into the next and consider the implications on your schedule and to-do list.
- **Tip:** Get the big, most important things out of the way first. Not everyone loves this suggestion – particularly those who like to check things off their list quickly.

Unfortunately, the hours in a day are limited. Completing the big things first ensures that you have enough time to move on to smaller, less important tasks. Starting with the smaller items on your list puts you in danger of not leaving enough time if you get distracted or interrupted.

Plotting: Now that you know what you need to do and the order in which you need to do it, consider how you are going to do each in the most efficient way. Essentially, the plotting phase blends preparation and prioritizing. First, take an item from your to-do list and identify all of the steps involved to complete the task, asking yourself what you will need to accomplish each one. Then prioritize that information and create a process for getting it done.

- **Best Practice:** Take the first five minutes of any task or project to create a roadmap. Assign times for each piece of your strategy. Watch the clock while you are working to gauge whether you're staying within your assigned time range. If you've done this project or task several times in the past, try to beat your own record by shaving off a few minutes where you can.
- **Tip:** Assemble what you need before starting a task or project. Having to stop mid-stream to get more information or supplies or to talk to people will compromise your laser focus.

A word of caution about planning – be flexible. Things beyond your control will inevitably get in the way, particularly when you work with other people. However, get back to your plan as quickly as possible.

There are literally hundreds of time management tips. Try mastering one or two of those mentioned above. Become addicted (in a healthy way) to being an efficiency expert and then keep coming back for more. The quality of your time and your life will likely improve exponentially.