

Conquering Procrastination

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Lack of communication and lack of diligence are the top two ethical complaints clients make about attorneys overall, not only in Missouri but in general. In 2015, these two categories combined were involved in 84% of complaints resulting in OCDC investigations.

Procrastination is a common challenge that can raise the risk of complaints about communication and diligence. If procrastination is a concern, any gains in minimizing that tendency can be helpful to avoid problems and protect your bottom line. In extreme situations, procrastination has even sometimes led to disbarment. Procrastination can generate practical challenges, stress, financial loss and sometimes even ethical dilemmas.

For some people, procrastination appears to act like a personal trait, bound to negative emotions. Styles of procrastinators that have been identified include the rebel, the worrier, the over doer, the perfectionist, the dreamer and most recently, the cyber slacker. The perfectionist is one of the most common. Some factors that play into procrastination include time management concerns, disorganization, dilatory strategies, boredom, professional stress and burnout, substance use and attention deficit concerns.

Here are some interventions that are helpful in overcoming procrastination:

Divide big projects into baby steps or chunks. Set your timer for 15 minutes or 30 minutes and work on the task. When your timer goes off, decide whether or not to reset it for another 15 or 30 minute time block. Most tasks seem more manageable when broken down this way. Once folks get started they often find their groove and keep going.

We generally put off tasks that are less interesting to us. To balance out that tendency, layer your workday by doing a task you like less for a while, then a task you love. Repeat this throughout the day. It's called building a work sandwich. This way, looking forward to the tasks you enjoy the most can lead you to address the ones you find less interesting.

Jump or dive in somewhere. Just do what you can.

Many strategies to overcome procrastination revolve around motivating yourself. Picture an incentive and dangle it in your mind's eye. Picture your success with the project done on time and all of the benefits. Imagine yourself literally doing the task, and then get started. You can also envision the sheer opposite situation in which you finish the task late or not at all. Then picture yourself experiencing the fallout.

Another strategy to motivate yourself is to identify your most dreaded task or meeting. Focus on a task you do your most to avoid or something in which you don't perform well. Next calculate your financial reward for a job well done, and then picture yourself doing something really meaningful and worthwhile to you with those earnings. If skill deficits play into your unease about the task, plan to become more proficient and confident at that task in the next few months by doing some professional reading or attending an in-service on that topic. If all else fails, consider if that task is something best delegated or referred elsewhere.

Some anti-procrastination strategies revolve around working against your mood. Mandatory procrastination is one such method. Instead of procrastinating for unspecified periods of time that seem to grow and grow, do it on purpose. Lay out your material, set your timer for a short, weird interval like 4 or 7 minutes, literally do nothing for those minutes, then get started. Another strategy along those lines is to plan a nightmare day. List those tasks you have been avoiding and do them on that day. This strategy is good for folks who like a challenge and a deadline. If you perform best under pressure, this is one to try.

Attorneys are increasingly using technology to keep in touch with clients, search legal databases and submit electronic filings. Technology use among attorneys will continue to increase due to its cost effectiveness, productivity benefits and ease of client access. This rise in technology use is accompanied by the risk of information overload and procrastination through cyber slacking. This is the newest form of procrastination.

Here are some suggestions on ways to keep your work focused on customer service and minimize electronic overload during your workday. When seeing clients, log off your computer, do not disturb your phone, silence your cell phone and reduce any other distractions. Check your e-mail at set times, not constantly. If you want to cyber slack, plan it as part of your reward.

When you work hard, play hard too. Instead of sacrificing vacations, take them. It may seem paradoxical, but in the long run, using your free time does help increase productivity and reduce procrastination.

If a personal concern is intruding, help is available by contacting the Missouri Lawyer's Assistance Program at 1-800-688-7859 for free, confidential assistance.

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