

IMPROVING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH TIME

By Chris Palmer Frazier

More than ever, lawyers say they are constantly putting out fires. The relentless time pressures and increasingly complex nature of a practice can mean that desks become piled high with unanswered mail, unfinished research, and unreturned phone messages. And the endless juggling act can leave even the best time managers stressed and fatigued, with no time or energy to formulate a strategy for change. Consider these facts:

- The average U.S. executive wastes one hour per day, or six weeks per year, searching for missing information in messy desks and files.¹
- The average worker today has about 37 hours of unfinished work on his or her desk at any one time.²
- The average executive spends 108 minutes daily reading and sending email messages.³

And the work environment is not the only challenge; in many ways, we are our own worst enemies when it comes to managing time effectively. In this world of information overload, where endless hours can be lost to surfing online and where the stream of email, Facebook updates, and tweets never stops, it can be challenging to feel truly productive and deliberate about one's profession. One side effect of internet culture is a weakened ability to focus on tasks that require true, deep concentration. Yet this is exactly what the practice of law demands of us, and it is improving the ability to concentrate on getting the most important things done that will lead to professional success. How do we get there from here?

Effective time management is the result of making solid choices about when and how to complete tasks, implementing good strategies to deal with chaotic work environments, and maintaining a well-rested yet alert mental state that is optimal for complex analysis. Easy, no? Well, not exactly. But the skills that lead to more effective time management *can be learned* by just about anyone who is willing to commit to a process of change. Anyone who has ever tried to change a habit, whether it be to quit smoking, maintain a healthy diet, or lose ten pounds, knows that change is difficult. As you consider the time management topics and skills below, give yourself permission to change your relationship to time by going through the process of habit change with all its ups and downs - you will make progress, and then you will backslide. Keep at it; the rewards of mastering these skills are priceless.

Topic 1: Organizing Paper

Rate yourself:

- ___ A. My desk usually remains clear except for a few of the most current items.
- ___ B. My desk surface gets covered with piles, and then periodically I clear it again.
- ___ C. Desk? What desk? There's so much paper stacked up that I just work elsewhere.

It's not about being organized for appearance's sake, really. Paper chaos leads to fractured focus and lessened ability to prioritize work effectively. Why? Because each item of paper that is unfiled represents a postponement of some sort. When you put the paper down and say, "I'm just going to set this right here, for now, and I'll get back to it later," you have *postponed a decision and postponed action*. The more decisions and actions you postpone, the greater the backlog of stress you create. Your mental energy will be wasted on monitoring unfinished tasks instead of choosing the proper action to take right now, and giving yourself permission to do it with 100% concentration.

¹ Wall Street Journal.

² www.NAPO.net.

³ www.NAPO.net.

SOLUTIONS:

1. On a *daily* basis, gather the accumulated papers together, and make a decision on each: What is it? What action do you need to take with respect to that paper? When will you take that action?
2. Once you have decided these things, put the paper away. That's right. If you leave it out on your desk as a reminder, you are creating visual chaos once more. Need a reminder? That's what your calendar is for. USE IT.
3. Got stacks of mixed notes on millions of different topics? Create a new rule for yourself, starting now: *one idea per page*. No more keeping an endless list of running reminders, the processing of which is a project all unto itself. Categorize your ideas as you go, and filing and organizing later is a snap.
4. Determine stages in processing paper that moves between team members, and assign specific homes for paper during each stage.

Topic 2: Task organization

Rate yourself:

- A. Every workday is about putting out fires and responding to impending deadlines; I feel like I'm scraping by but always behind.
- B. Once in a great while, I try to plan my week, but I'm usually derailed after a day or two goes by.
- C. I start each day with a solid plan of action, and usually by the end of the day I have managed to stay on track with 75% or more of what I have planned.

To-do lists used to be a great tool, because the pace of work and life was much slower, and to-do lists tended to contain 10 items or less. Now, most professionals have a backlog of tasks that sits on a list somewhere for days, weeks, and even months before those tasks can be completed. In our interruption-rich working environments, one simply cannot execute effectively without a plan for each day. Planning effective workdays is a skill that takes time to master, but here are the basics:

SOLUTIONS:

1. Plan your upcoming day the night before. Many people approach work planning by sitting down at the desk first thing in the morning and going through the piles to make decisions. Right idea, wrong time: mornings are precious work times – don't squander them on an activity like planning. If you plan the night before, you can hit the ground running with your most important task for the day. Knocking out something big before noon gives you an incredible energy and motivation boost for the rest of the day.
2. Decide the following during each planning session:
 - What actions will you take?
 - When will you do them?
 - How long will each action take?
 - What individual steps will you take on each piece of work?
3. For each work decision you make, you should enter a corresponding calendar item blocking out the necessary work time. Nature abhors a vacuum, and unprotected time will be filled up if you do nothing to stop it.
4. Focus on sticking close to the revenue line when deciding which tasks to execute first; this is a natural prioritization rule that's easy to follow when you are feeling stressed by multiple competing obligations.

Topic 3: Interruption management

Rate yourself:

- A. For the most part, interruptions do not rule my day; I am able to get high-priority work done.
- B. Some days aren't bad, and other days I feel like I'm hopping from one task to another all day.
- C. I'm constantly functioning in reaction mode, and I never get time to do the things I planned.

Interruptions in the workplace are more or less a constant. There is always another email to read, a new piece of mail to open, an unscheduled meeting to attend, or a ringing phone to answer. What to do in the face of all that noise? Take a deep breath, sit down for a moment, and repeat the following as necessary: *I cannot*

ever get it all done. I can only choose to do the most important things, and that requires vigilance about how each moment is spent. Good lawyering involves deep, complex, critical thought. This is not something that occurs in the midst of chaos; one has to create silence, both literally and figuratively, for this sort of mental activity.

SOLUTIONS:

1. Analyze the patterns of your workday to find times when your environment is most quiet. Take advantage of those times by blocking them out in your calendar and using them for tasks that require high-level analysis. A note: *for most people, first thing in the morning is ideal.*
2. When you block out time, use it effectively:
 - Decide in advance what you are going to complete during that time, and gather together all materials in preparation.
 - Plan out the steps you will follow or the topics you will research for a complex task in detail; this saves fretting time during the actual activity.
 - If you are going to fend off interruptions, be serious about it: turn off your email program, and turn off the phone. Close your door, and instruct your assistant to take messages. Give yourself a short list of no more than three persons who may interrupt you at any time, and tell everyone else you will get back to them after the work is done.
 - For a particularly difficult task, give yourself a reward upon completion to keep your motivation high while you work.
3. Limit your natural tendency to interrupt yourself (i.e. check your email) by setting specific times during the day when you can “interrupt” yourself by checking email – once in the morning, and once in the afternoon, perhaps.
4. Batch together your tasks that can be completed with a lower level of focus, such as phone calls, email processing, and routine paperwork. Schedule these activities during your lowest-energy times.

A final thought:

Relentless interruptions, high volume workloads, and constant pressure to produce results can leave anyone exhausted. Schedule daily time to recharge your batteries with activities that enrich you and make you feel whole, whether it be exercise, reading for pleasure, or uninterrupted time with friends and family. To manage time effectively, you must be alert and energized enough to make good decisions from one moment to the next. In other words, solid rest and renewal makes you a better lawyer, so make time for it.



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