5 Time Management Tips for Lawyers

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Your job is demanding. For many lawyers, 12-hour days are not out of the ordinary, and constant demands from clients and partners can have you working around the clock. However, while hard work is a badge of honor in the legal profession, it's more important to work smart.

Better allotting their time is an area where many lawyers can improve. The 2016 Legal Trends Report analyzed work habits of over 40,000 lawyers and found that they spend only 2.2 hours of their time on billable work—that's a paltry 28 percent of a modest eight-hour workday, and even less if you're working more.

In a field where every second counts, losing three quarters of your billable time every day can be a death sentence. Here are some time-tested time management tips for taking back a few precious minutes, or hours, and getting the most out of your day.

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1. Know (And Practice) The Basics Of Time Management

Due to varying work habits, environments, preferences, and even personality, there's no one-size-fits-all approach to productivity. Ultimately, it comes down to finding the right techniques and toolset that complement your personal approach to work.

First off, make sure you have a handle on the basics of time management. Start by taking stock of how you spend your days. In a document or notebook, note where your time goes for a week or so, and jot down any patterns you see. Use this as a benchmark to improve upon.

Then, get organized.

Make to-do lists. (May we suggest David Allen's Getting Things Done methodology?). Also, get your calendar in order. Are you a morning person or a night owl? When you can, schedule busy periods during the times of day when you'll have more energy. Block out interruptions for these periods, if possible.

Finally, familiarize yourself with strategies to guard against time thieves. Know how (and when) to say “no” to tasks that aren’t helpful for your career or your firm. If procrastination is an issue, combat it head-on by identifying roadblocks, breaking big tasks into manageable chunks, and letting go of perfectionism.

2. Use Apps

Android and Apple each have about 2 million apps on offer at the moment. Within that, there are hundreds of options that you can use to manage your time better and improve your practice. Some of the more obvious options include Clio (for case management, document management, and time tracking), Fastcase (for faster legal research) or TrialPad (for paperless trial presentations), but it’s worth going beyond apps designed specifically for lawyers.

For example, you might want a business card reader to effortlessly keep track of contacts, or a to-do list app to upgrade yourself from a pen-and-paper list (or a Word document).

3. Minimize The Cost Of Task-Switching

Much has been said about the dangers of multitasking, but when you’re a busy lawyer with a lot on your plate, it might still seem necessary. To combat this, try to focus on one thing at a time while taking care to minimize the cost of task-switching.

Every time you switch tasks, it takes at least several minutes to shift and re-establish your focus. If you shift between tasks too often, task-switching can eat up as much as 40 percent of your productivity.

How can you minimize this cost? First, try focusing on one task for an extended period of time. Rapidly switching back and forth will cost you—even if it’s only between two different tasks. Set a block of time to check your emails, then return client calls, then go through your invoices to see which ones need to be followed up on—don’t go back and forth between each of these things.

If you absolutely cannot focus on just one thing at a time, try to group similar tasks together, as there will be a lower cost for switching between them. For instance, don’t intermix computer tasks with phone tasks.

To make this even easier, you can use Clio’s law firm task management software to organize your tasks, set priorities, and track progress—all in one place—so you can stay focused on what really matters.

4. Use A Timer—To Save Time

Timers are not just for tracking billable hours. They can also help you save time on non-billable tasks. The Pomodoro method, created by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s, forces you to focus on one task for a set period of time (reducing task switching!) while taking frequent breaks to avoid mental fatigue.

Here's how it works:

- Pick a task
- Set a timer for 25 minutes
- Focus on that task—and only that task—for the entire 25 minutes
- Take a five minute break when the timer goes off
- Repeat as needed (take a longer break if you're doing three to four cycles in a row)

The idea is that you'll stay focused, but fresh enough that your productivity doesn't decline as you work longer hours.

5. Respect The 80/20 Rule

The 80/20 rule applies in many areas, but in work, it suggests that roughly 20 percent of your actions will be responsible for 80 percent of value created.

This certainly holds true for the legal profession—as mentioned above, the Legal Trends Report found that lawyers only spend 28 percent of an estimated eight-hour workday on billable work.

How does this apply to time management? Try to give more attention to the time you spend on billable work. When you're prioritizing tasks, make sure you're actually putting billable work first. Delegate administrative tasks to staff when possible. If you're a solo, try using an affordable solution like Ruby Receptionist.

For lawyers, time is your most valuable resource. You can't get it back once it's gone, and you can't create more from thin air, so take the time to go beyond these tips and continually improve your time management skills. Your practice (and your personal life) will be much better for it in the long run.

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