



## **IT'S ABOUT TIME! GETTING RID OF TIME WASTERS AND TIME STEALERS**

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Time is precious. Skill is necessary. But skill alone doesn't earn you a dime, unless you can apply that skill to client needs, and bill for it. Whether the time is billed hourly, contingently, on a flat fee basis, or any combination of methods, the fundamental element which goes into creating revenue is your time.

There are immutable laws in the universe. No matter what, everyone operates on the same allotment of 24 hours in a day. That being said, have you noticed that some people manage to get more hours out of the day than others? Yes, of course, they don't really *get* more hours in a day than anyone else, they just manage to productively *utilize* more hours. How? They have focus. And they are expert and merciless in eliminating time wasters.

Our environment and the elements within seem to conspire every single day to waste some of our valuable time. Even worse, some don't waste your time, they outright steal time from your firm! Let's focus on some common time wasters and stealers.

"Ding. You've got mail!" Email is an essential communication tool. But enormous amounts of time are lost in small morsels throughout the day by dealing with mail ineffectively. Here are a few simple guidelines to help:

- Turn off all notification sounds, including the envelope which appears in the system tray as an option. This will eliminate distraction, and the temptation to respond intermittently.
- Create folders and rules which automatically route emails on active cases to client folders. As time permits during the day check those folders. Venture into your general inbox less frequently.
- If you have a matter at a critical phase, create a rule which provides a desktop alert for inbound emails from client and/or opposing counsel. Turn it off as soon as the critical phase is over.

- Don't touch emails more than once. When you read an email take action. That action may include (1) deletion (2) reply (3) flag for follow-up (4) assign to someone else (5) file for future reference. Nothing should be left in your inbox which requires additional action without being put on your calendar, to-do list, or flagged. There should be no smoking guns left in the inbox which require you to repeatedly review the same emails over and over.
- If you don't have a timekeeping tool which automatically prompts you to record time in email, use the Journal built into Microsoft Office to automatically record the time. At the end of the day review what you've recorded and add what you've missed to your timesheet.

"Do you have a moment?" Unless you are a solo, it is likely you will have interruptions throughout the day by people who pop their head in your door to ask a question or just chat. Those small interruptions add up to enormous time losses by the end of the week. If you need to concentrate on something, close your door.

Despite being strongly in favor of open door policies, I know that small distractions can create gaps of 5 - 10 minutes required to regain momentum in creative thought. Time you will eventually write off, or maybe don't have at all. If you want people to honor your closed door, try one of the following:

- Put a note on the door stating approximately when you will be available again.
- Leave a clipboard and pen outside your door so people who need you can jot their name, knowing you'll get back to them as soon as you are done.
- Set a regular time aside daily when you are known to be in "do not disturb" mode, and try to stick to it except for when emergencies arrive. People will learn not to interrupt during that time unless it is truly critical.
- Put your phone on Do Not Disturb. Alert your secretary to any exceptions, e.g. individuals you will speak to no matter what you are doing.

The telephone is another tool which tends to interrupt focus consistently throughout the day. Judicious use of voicemail can provide much-needed relief. Just be sure to return calls regularly. I encourage attorneys to try to set aside consistent times periods each day to return calls, emergencies excluded. Clients make less



repeated calls and are more likely to be available for your return call if they know that you usually return calls at particularly times.

Now we get to some more serious considerations. There are distractions lurking on the computer which have derailed careers for partners, associates, and staff. It's time to deal with them, painful as that may be.

First, it's time to remove the games. Yes, I know they are relaxing during a lunch hour. I've witnessed partners playing intently while engaging in conversations with clients more often than you'd believe. I'm sure the clients would be disgusted if they knew how much of the lawyer's attention they were really getting while the meter ticked.

Staff and attorneys steal time playing games during the day when they think no one is looking. It creates resentment and derails teamwork for staff. Many an attorney has become literally addicted to a PC game, and has allowed their work to stagnate and hours to plummet as a result. Games were important when PCs first came out. They helped people develop skill using the mouse. We're way past that.

Second, remind people that there is no expectation of privacy, and that viewing pornography, shopping, engaging in personal chatter, and browsing through their social media sites during work hours is not acceptable. Occasionally check the history in their web browser log of sites visited. Enforce the policy when you find inappropriate sites visited. And block sites with objectionable content.

Third, provide guidance and oversight to attorneys at all levels where accountability for their time is concerned. An associate at a large firm was just terminated because he spent most of his day browsing his social media sites instead of working. He was literally addicted.

An attorney who is at the office 10 hours a day but never records more than 5 hours on the timesheet has a problem. For many years firms have ignored this behavior. The attitude was that if the attorney had to work 7 days a week until 9 each night to meet their goal under this circumstance, it was really not the firm's problem. But it is, because they are not nearly as sharp or productive as they might otherwise be if they worked less hours in aggregate.

It's probably too late for many attorneys to change their ability to focus. But at least catch bad habits in young attorneys and correct them while there's an ability for them to change and improve. You may not want to get involved, but in the long run you will be doing them and your firm a favor.



Time is a precious and limited resource. Don't allow it to be wasted or stolen. This article covers just a few examples of areas where you can make improvements. Commit to making one small improvement this month. Recommit when backsliding occurs. Repeat at least once every four to six months. You'll be amazed at the difference two years from now.

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