Taking Control: Time Management Tips for Busy Lawyers

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David Ackert

You have at least three phone numbers (home, office, and cell), at least two email addresses (work and personal), and at least two social media accounts (Facebook and LinkedIn). You can be texted, tweeted, emailed, snail-mailed and even faxed. If people want to reach you, they expect to do so almost immediately. It's no wonder you feel pulled in too many directions and think your scarce time is being wasted.

Add to that the evolution of our professional landscape — the fact that being an expert in your respective field requires a more complex understanding of facts and trends than ever before. To earn and keep your clients' business, you have to impress them with information they didn't already know (or could Google).

Then there's business development, an endeavor once sufficiently addressed with a listing in the phone book, an ad in the paper, and a membership with the Rotary club. Now, it requires constant networking, social media posts, charity involvement, PR, conference attendance, competitive intelligence, and persistent "pinging."

Ways to Make More Time for Business Development

A healthy practice is already a full-time job. The key is to be as efficient as possible so that you have time left for business development (or whatever else you've been neglecting). Here are six steps you can take to increase your efficiency.

1. Start your day with a task list, and use it to guide your activities. This is not as easy as it sounds. All too often we find ourselves starting our day with an idea of how it will go and what we'll get done, only to find that we get sidetracked, distracted, held-up, and rain-checked by various other people and projects. If this happens, be disciplined in getting your day back on track. Keep a white-board or some other large, visible list in your office that you can use to remind yourself of your priorities for the day. The harder it is to miss, the better.

2. Establish set times for email responses, and stick to them. If you always start every day with email, you're immediately entering a reactive work mode. Your email inbox is like a to-do list assigned by 100 people, none of whose immediate concern is whether or not you bring in new clients. And email is typically the gateway to an entire day spent in that reactive mode. Of course, you'll tend to your clients' needs, but it's very easy to fall into the trap of serving others' needs all day long, without ever getting around to yours.

Before you open your inbox in the morning, start your day with a proactive business development project. Maybe it's reviewing a list of prospects you've recently collected, or inviting a colleague out to lunch to see if he or she could provide any potential for referrals. Start your day doing something proactive that serves your goals, because chances are that you won't find time for it once the day gets started.

3. Stop multitasking. There is a widespread misconception that multitasking is doing two or more tasks simultaneously. But this is inaccurate; multitasking actually involves switching back and forth between different tasks (often with mediocre results). This task-switching consists of two stages. The first is goal-shifting: deciding to focus on another task rather than the one on which you're currently working. The second is rule activation: recalibrating your mind away from the "rules" of the first task and toward the "rules" of the second task. This recalibration can squander as much as 40 percent of your productive time — hardly worth it. Instead, make a conscious effort to "uni-task," (i.e., work on only one task at a time). Block out time in your calendar and close your office door to ensure there are minimal interruptions during your designated uni-tasking time.

4. Clear off the mess on your desk, so you can think straight. Rather than leave papers cluttered on your desk, apply the "touch it once" principle. For each item, ask yourself if you have time, right now, to touch this item just once? After opening and reading it, can you deal with it quickly? Then decide whether it needs to be filed, responded to, or delegated. Whichever of these three actions is required, do it immediately. If you don't have time now to "touch it once" and get it off your desk, then leave it until you're able to focus on it.

5. Use a timer to limit the number of minutes you spend on any given task. Perfection is often the death of production. Whether drafting an email to a client or updating your bio, there are diminishing rates of return on projects that take up too much of your time and attention. Estimate at the outset how much time you will need to devote to a project in order to get your final product to a solid B+ grade level. If it takes hours longer to make it an A+, it's probably not worth the effort for a result that is only marginally better.

6. Delegate more of your work to someone else, even if they don't always do it the "right way." The only way to survive the frenzy of a busy day is to prioritize — to cut low-yield activities out of our lives so that there's enough room for the ones that produce the best results. Most of the successful rainmakers I know are obsessed with leverage. They are constantly looking for ways to minimize the time spent on client service so they can focus more on client acquisition. Why? Because it's far easier to find a service partner than a rainmaker.

Prioritize, own your schedule, then delegate. You might find that you have more time for business development than you thought.

David Ackert *is the President of Ackert Inc. and a mentor to high-achieving professionals in the legal, corporate, finance and accounting sectors. David has advised hundreds of lawyers, CEOs and professional-services executives on overcoming business development and* *marketing challenges. He has developed and implemented business development programs for countless firms, from AmLaw 100s to local boutiques. Follow him on LinkedIn or Twitter @DavidAckert.*

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