



5 WAYS

for Legal Professionals to
Boost Productivity

“Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort.”

Paul J. Meyer

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INTRODUCTION

Distractions. Interruptions. Time stealers. Let's face it, whether or not we realize it, we all experience these pesky diversions to productivity. Look around you – you'll likely be met with stacks of papers, ringing phones, incoming emails, chatty co-workers and more. Indeed, distractions abound.

So how do you improve your productivity in the industrious law firm or legal department environment? Here are 5 foolproof ways to get started...

#1. Focus on the right things.

Learning to become really efficient at completing a task doesn't matter much if that task doesn't help you meet your goals or drive results. Any tip here is virtually useless if you're not focusing on the right things. Does internally filing documents throughout the day or responding to emails as soon as they hit your inbox help to move your law firm practice forward, help you meet your goals or really make a substantial impact? Probably not. That's why this step is so critical.

Consider this sage advice: perhaps the most productive thing you could do, if nothing else, is to eliminate non-value add

"filler" tasks that don't contribute to driving results. Audit your to-do list or take an inventory of your daily habits and routine to discern whether or not you're focused on the right things. You can even refer back to your law firm's or legal department's mission statement or your job description to help regain perspective.

If you're saying, "but it's my job to do some of these things" then your goal might be to reduce them or better manage them by scheduling these tasks during a time that you typically experience a productivity lull, say 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

TAKEAWAY:

Don't just get things done;
get the right things done.



#2. Introduce structure – & eat the frogs first.

You've probably heard the expression, "work smarter, not harder." Why? Because many of us fall into the trap of doing things the way we've always done them. Yes, our habits become our routine; good or bad, efficient or inefficient. We've often found that without a plan or a schedule, firefighting becomes the norm, things get dropped, procrastination sets in, productivity plummets and stress encroaches.

Introducing structure to your day such as creating a schedule – a to-do list doesn't count – will help you stay organized and on task. Your calendar is a great place to do this. For instance, if you're a paralegal, your workday schedule might look something like this: answer emails and make phone calls, block out time to conduct legal research or draft correspondence and pleadings, block out one hour for unexpected requests, check email again, phone calls again, then done for the day.

Why don't to-do lists count? According to an article on Harvard Business Review online¹, there are a few reasons that render them ineffective for most people, including: people get overwhelmed with

EAT THE FROGS FIRST

There's an old saying, "Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day." Brian Tracy, in his book, *Eat That Frog!*, shares that you should eat frogs – the most important tasks or things you don't want to do, but actually need to – first thing in the morning to fuel your energy and momentum for the rest of the day. Yes, frogs are often the ugly, unpleasant tasks.

Have more than one frog? Conquer the ugliest one first lest it become victim to procrastination. Plus, eating your frogs first leaves you free to do the things that you enjoy doing.

the things they need to do, they struggle with prioritizing their tasks, and they feel like they continuously add to the list but not reduce it.

Yes, scheduling your day by putting tasks into your calendar enables you to get more done and set expectations about what can be accomplished with the amount of production time you have available. As Matthew Toren of Entrepreneur.com says, “when you focus too heavily on the act of doing over the

brilliance of planning, you can be spinning your wheels with a lot of extra activities that are highly inefficient or aren’t driving any real results.”²



TAKEAWAY:

A scheduled day keeps
wasted time at bay.
Ribbit.



#3. Minimize distractions.

Distractions are par for the course in the fast-paced, deadline driven legal environment, so learning to manage them is key. In fact, academic studies have found that office workers are interrupted or self-interrupt roughly every 3 minutes as a result of various digital and human factors. Worst yet, it can take up to 23 minutes for a worker to return to the original task.³

You get a text on your smartphone, you hear a ping on your computer marking the arrival of a new email, you get a phone call and it's a client who wants an update on their case; yes, distractions abound and they will never be eliminated. However, there are certain things you can do to manage them rather than allow the distractions to manage you.

HOW TO MANAGE DISTRACTIONS

Tip:

You can create an autoresponder in Outlook notifying others what time(s) you check email so they have an expectation as to when they should receive a response from you.

a Email, phones (mobile and desk) and wifi are excellent connectivity tools, but they're also remarkably disruptive to your workflow. **Turn them off or ignore them during those blocks of time you have scheduled for important legal work.**

b **Organize your work area to minimize visual distractions.** Keep a tray for incoming work and only keep case documents and files you're working on in front of you. This can apply to your computer, too! Organize your digital files, keep browser tabs open for only those things you're currently working on, and so on.

c **Avoid unproductive distractions by creating productive ones of your own such as taking regular or scheduled breaks.** Grab a snack or walk a few laps around the office – your body and mind will thank you – and your productivity will remain intact.

TAKEAWAY:

Manage distractions or they will manage you.



According to attention expert, David Strayer, **only 2% of the population** – what he calls supertaskers – have the capacity to efficiently handle attention, decision making and information processing exceptionally well.

Which leads us to...

#4. Curtail multitasking.

What?! You might be asking yourself. But I'm the master multitasker in the entire universe. Yes, we used to brandish that false badge of distinction until we learned we were but mere mortals. In fact, when the vast majority of us multitask, our brain is simply switching from one task to another, not actually juggling both at the same time. The truth is many of us confuse multitasking with actual distraction.

According to studies conducted by cognitive psychologist and attention expert, David Strayer, 98% of the population lack the cognitive abilities to simultaneously juggle two demanding tasks without pauses or errors.⁴ Other studies have even observed a fall in participant's IQs when multitasking.⁵

According to Christine Rosen, Editor and Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center: "When we talk about multitasking, we are really talking about attention: the art of paying attention, the ability to shift our attention, and, more broadly, to exercise judgment about what objects are worthy of our attention. People who have achieved great things often credit for their success a finely honed skill for paying attention. When asked about his particular genius, Isaac Newton responded that if he had made any discoveries, it was "owing more to patient attention than to any other talent."

So what can we do? Focus on one thing at a time until it's fully completed before moving on to the next.

TAKEAWAY:

Just say yes to
monotasking.



#5. Leverage technology.

And finally, a great way to boost productivity is to make use of legal software tools and technology solutions. Take a look around your firm. Are people handling tedious administrative or business tasks? If so, those are ripe opportunities to leverage technology and automate those tasks thereby saving time and money.

Plus, you may not have much choice left. Like a page out of *Business 101*, clients are seeking added value and greater efficiency more than ever. “Clients will continue to demand efficiency and responsiveness from their lawyers. They expect lawyers to create efficient internal processes, completing work quickly and for less cost. They expect lawyers to use

technology to perform tasks previously done by junior associates, and some corporate clients refuse to pay for the work of first-year associates,” according to a report on the legal profession by Wisconsin’s Board of Governors.⁶ In *The Evolution of the Legal Professional*, Ari Kaplan, echoed this sentiment that rising customer expectations will require attorneys to be proactive in looking for ways to be efficient in their day-to-day workflow.⁷

Every law firm – solo, small, medium, or large – is, and will continue to be, affected by technological changes. Devote some attention into identifying ways to use technology to add value to your client’s work and improve your ability to compete successfully for legal services.

TAKEAWAY:

The verdict is in:
tech it up.



Wrap-Up

The reality is that we commonly experience pesky distractions and inefficiencies in the legal environment. Indeed, productivity is typically achieved through an attitude of excellence, thoughtful planning and focused effort. If you're ready to start improving your productivity, you can exercise all five ways discussed in this eBook or just pick one and start from there. Small habits can create big results. As John C. Maxwell once said, "You'll never change your life until you change something you do daily. The secret of your success is found in your daily routine." And we couldn't agree more.

Five foolproof ways for legal professionals to boost productivity:

- 1. Focus on the right things**
- 2. Introduce structure**
- 3. Minimize distractions**
- 4. Curtail multitasking**
- 5. Leverage technology**

¹<https://hbr.org/2012/01/to-do-lists-dont-work/>

²<http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/232755>

³<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324339204578173252223022388>

⁴<https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201312/meet-the-super-taskers>

⁵<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-myth-of-multitasking>

⁶<https://www.reinhartlaw.com/services/buslaw/corpgovern/documents/art1111%20te.pdf>

⁷http://discoverready.com/wp-content/uploads/DOLA34009_Evolution_v01.pdf



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