



SEPTEMBER 2007

Issue No. 67

# IN SIGHT

*for Oregon Lawyers*

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## TIPS FOR IMPROVING YOUR TIME MANAGEMENT

Many lawyers schedule their workdays based on whatever fire needs to be put out at the time. Unfortunately, since they rarely plan ahead, the fires just keep coming. This is exhausting not only for the practitioners, but also for anyone who works alongside them.

Poor time management techniques take a toll in productivity, revenues, energy, and stress levels. As a supervisor, your time management abilities (or lack thereof) also have a direct impact on those working under you. What kind of time management technique do you have? Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I have a clear sense of my priorities each day?
- Do I properly estimate how long a project will take to complete?
- Do I plan as much as possible to reduce unnecessary emergencies?

If you answered “no” to any of those questions, you are probably using the “time management by crisis” technique. Fortunately, it doesn’t have to be this way. By altering some of your behaviors, you can significantly improve the way you manage time and thus increase your practice’s productivity and bottom line.

### Changing Is Worth the Effort

Improving your time management is going to require change. Plan on at least three to six weeks to incorporate new habits into your routine. It’s difficult to change too many behaviors at once, so the best approach is to choose two at a time, starting with the ones that will make the most difference.

Effective time management will allow you to use your days in ways consistent with your goals and values.

Think how nice it would be to locate documents and other information quickly. Imagine reducing stress because you are no longer working in crisis mode when it’s not necessary. A greater sense of control and renewed creativity can be additional by-products. You’ll also gain more time for your family and outside interests, creating a more balanced life.

If those reasons aren’t compelling enough, take a moment to multiply 15 minutes times the number of days you work each year. Let’s say you work approximately 220 days annually. If you save 15 minutes a day over that period, you have “found” 3,300 minutes or 55 hours a year. Multiply 55 by your hourly billing rate. This is how much revenue you will gain for the year. And this doesn’t even include the gains of those you work with. If you work more efficiently, it is highly probable they will, too!

### Planning and Prioritizing

Planning and prioritizing are at the heart of good time management. Begin by thinking about your personal work-style preferences. For example, at what time of the day are you most productive? When do you concentrate best? Do you focus better if you have music playing or do you need complete silence? Keep this information in mind as you plan and prioritize your time.

The first step is to create a master list of all the matters for which you are currently responsible. Then set your weekly goals by looking over your master list and deciding what needs to be accomplished during this particular week. End each week by establishing your goals and to-do lists for the following week. Share the list with your assistant so that he or she can plan ahead, too.

Next, from your weekly list, create daily to-do lists of the items that must be completed each day. Of course, some things arise at the last minute that you will need

Continued on page 2

to add as you go. Prioritize the items so you don't waste time during the day trying to figure out what to do next. Start your day's list with no more than three to five tasks that absolutely must be completed. Consider all other items something you will tackle if – and only if – you complete the must-dos. Stick to your list unless a real emergency occurs.

Plan out a large project by writing down all the steps required to complete it (including assignments that will be delegated to others), and write a due date next to each step. Add these steps to your weekly goals and daily to-do lists. Be sure to schedule several blocks of uninterrupted time to keep the project moving forward. Put the time on your calendar as you would a client appointment.

Begin each day with the most crucial task instead of routine activities that eat up your time, such as answering e-mail and returning phone calls. Otherwise, the morning will be gone before you start the major assignment. But don't neglect to allot time in your day for phone calls, e-mails, and the inevitable interruptions.

### The Biggest Time-Waster

Everyone procrastinates from time to time. If this is your normal modus operandi, however, you are robbing yourself. You are making a choice to create crises where none existed and thereby living a more stressful life. You are also creating additional unnecessary stress for people you work with.

Ask yourself, "Why am I procrastinating?" In some cases, you just may not have enough information to proceed yet. In other cases, there may be less obvious, more emotionally based reasons. Fear of failure is not uncommon – even among successful attorneys. Just remember that fear is often much greater than the actual reality – and the only way to find out is simply to move forward.

Other suggestions for overcoming procrastination include:

- Do the project at your "peak" time or first thing in the morning.
- Use the "Salami Technique," which means

slicing the whole into smaller pieces.

- Delegate the task, or portions of it, to an appropriate person.
- Bounce ideas around with a colleague to help you get started.
- Walk away from it for a few minutes. A 10-minute walk outside can do wonders.
- Call the OAAP for help.

Planning, prioritizing, and overcoming procrastination can allow you to take charge of your time, proactively using it to meet your goals in a way that matches your values.

This article originally appeared as "Time Management by Crisis: Is It Your Technique of Choice?" by Marcia Pennington Shannon, in the July/August 2006 issue of Law Practice Magazine, published by the ABA Law Practice Management Section. Reprinted with permission.