

The Total Solo

By Tossing Out the Time-Wasters in Your Day You'll Assure a Smooth-Running Law Practice

What does your hat rack look like at your office? How many hooks are there? Are there enough hooks for your receptionist hat, secretary hat, law clerk hat, IT support hat, janitor hat and bookkeeper hat? Is there a hook left over for your lawyer hat? Or do you just toss them on the floor and then scramble to find the right hat for the task at hand? And how do you keep track of all those hats without diving into the bottle of Tylenol*? (*NOTE: I am not advocating any particular painkiller; Advil, aspirin or Aleve will also do just fine.)

This is the dilemma faced by solo attorneys and even many smaller law offices that don't have separate people for all those jobs. The question is essentially how to handle all these tasks and assure a smooth-running law practice. The answer lies somewhere in the spectrum between efficient time and resource management and hiring help.

Most lawyers handle very similar daily tasks, whether you are a solo or work in a very large office. These tasks are, not in order of significance, answering client calls; doing legal research; preparing forms or documents; communicating with opposing counsel and/or vendors; coordinating schedules; docketing deadlines; billing and administrative tasks (yes, even filing deserves your attention once in a while); court appearances; and the necessary water cooler break. As most attorneys know, these tasks can take up about 100 hours of a 40-hour work week; if you're a solo, perhaps more.

MANAGING TIME, RESOURCES

In this technological age, the first logical resource is . . . well, technology. Use of technology should be focused on

increasing efficiency. If it will take you two weeks to learn how to use the new gadget, it is not a wise use of your time. In addition, if it is outdated technology or adds too much incremental cost, it is not a wise choice of equipment.

For those that still have the need or use of faxes, a smarter choice is a



service like eFax (www.efax.com) or Fax2Mail (www.fax2mail.com), where you can send faxes direct from your computer and receive faxes in your e-mail inbox. You achieve the same task, but your additional incremental cost is very low because you are using your existing computer, Internet and e-mail technologies.

Another useless waste of time is making trips to the post office. Most solos and small firms don't have their own shipping department. Instead, you can either buy stamps by mail from the Postal Service (www.usps.com) or use a service like Stamps.com (www.stamps.com) to handle all your postage needs in your small office, while tracking the costs to bill them back to your client.

You need to rely heavily on the Internet. Not only does this make you more efficient, but it will also save you

a lot of money. Why pay for bound volumes of the court rules when they are all available online? If you have access to a legal research service such as FastCase (www.fastcase.com), why pay for Westlaw or LexisNexis? In addition, a lot of court and other resources are available online, such as court forms, law review articles, and e-mail lists such as Solosez (www.solosez.net) that can answer a lot of your questions.

Answering the telephone creates inefficiencies because it typically interrupts another task. Virtual assistants are becoming more accepted and affordable. For example, Ruby Receptionists (www.callruby.com) can handle all of your "front desk" needs such as answering calls and initial client intake. Virtual paralegals are also providing some relief to those practices that involve substantial forms work. StarrParalegals (www.starrparalegals.com) assist attorneys involved in bankruptcy and creditors' rights work.

There are some "low-tech" solutions to the time management dilemma as well. Here are a few tips:

- Don't take every call (also known as "that's what voicemail is for").
- Prioritize assignments based on legal deadlines. This seems obvious (from a malpractice standpoint), but does carry a downside from a client satisfaction perspective. This is often a difficult choice to make and many clients don't understand why their project is not the highest priority. You may be tempted to perform work for clients that are paying at a higher rate or on a more regular basis, but always remember that a dissatisfied client is likely to do greater harm to your practice than

the hourly rate for a happy client.

- Schedule time for administrative needs. Disorganization breeds inefficiency. Although the funny YouTube video somebody sent you is more entertaining than filing, step away from the computer for a bit and do yourself a favor by paying attention to these sleeping monsters we call “nonbillable work.”

WHEN TO GET HELP

Even though as a solo or small firm lawyer you admittedly have the powers of a superhero, even superheroes need sidekicks sometimes. You need to recognize when and how to get help. Many tasks can be subcontracted to an outside service or handled by a part-time employee. The key to knowing when it is time to set the ego aside and allow someone into your cloister is when the nonbillable tasks are taking up more of your time than the billable tasks.

Shared office suites also offer unified services where a receptionist will answer your phone with your company name. They also provide conference rooms, technology connections, fax and mail services, and many other standard

services available to larger firms at a much-reduced price. An example of this service is HQ (www.hq.com), with office suites all over the country.

Finally, consider outsourcing your legal research and writing. Many lawyers market themselves exclusively in these services. Lisa Solomon (www.questionoflaw.net), a New York attorney, concentrates her work in legal research and writing for attorneys. Having such tasks handled by an outside service, properly pre-approved by the client of course, can free up your time to handle other tasks.

CAVEAT EMPTOR

There are, however, some cautions to these approaches. Never forget your ethical responsibilities and your obligations to your client. Again, this is obvious, but where larger firms have committees to handle ethical issues and sophisticated software and staff to run checks for the remotest of conflicts, the solo or small firm lawyer must dig into his/her negligible available time and perform these same tasks at an equally proficient level.

Since you have so many hats on your

hat rack as a solo or small firm attorney, you need to always keep ethics and client responsibilities on your mind. It can be maddening because the normal response is “I don’t have time to do all this.” But your cry will likely go unheard because you have chosen the size and nature of your practice.

Thus, the final, and perhaps most important, tip I can offer is that you manage the number of clients and cases you accept. You can easily fall into the trap of thinking more clients equals more revenue and I can feed my family next month. If you neglect (hence the root of the term negligence) one client, it can ruin all that hard work you’ve put into everything else. By soiling one hat, you may need to take your entire hat collection to the dry cleaners.

As a friend of mine succinctly put it, “Run your practice; don’t let your practice run you.” Now take off your hats and go home. ■

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Solo Resources

Don’t go it alone. Here are some resources that will make your work life that much easier.

Fax to e-mail Services

- eFax – www.efax.com
- MyFax – www.myfax.com
- Fax2Mail – www.fax2mail.com
- RingCentral – www.ringcentral.com
- TrustFax – www.trustfax.com

Mail and Shipping Services

- Stamps.com – www.stamps.com
- USPS – <http://shop.usps.com>
- UPS – www.ups.com
- FedEx – www.fedex.com/us/
- DHL – www.dhl-usa.com
- Uship – www.uship.com (for larger items)

Legal Research

- Fastcase – www.fastcase.com
- Google Scholar – <http://scholar.google.com> (Select “Legal Opinions and Journals.”)
- Loislaw – www.loislaw.com
- Versuslaw – www.versuslaw.com
- Findlaw – www.findlaw.com
- Legal Information Institute at Cornell University – www.law.cornell.edu
- lexisONE from LexisNexis – www.lexisone.com

Court Forms / Email Lists / Other Resources

- Pennsylvania Courts – www.courts.state.pa.us
- Philadelphia Courts – www.courts.phila.gov
- Philadelphia Courts Forms Center – www.courts.phila.gov/forms/
- Solosez – www.solosez.net
- Washington University Law School Mailing Lists – <http://lists.washlaw.edu/mailman/listinfo> (various state and subject matter free email lists)

Virtual Assistants / Virtual Offices / Virtual Paralegals

- Ruby Receptionists – www.callruby.com
- Onebox – www.onebox.com
- Receptionist.org – www.receptionist.org
- Regus – <http://virtualoffices.regus.com>
- Intelligent Office – www.intelligentoffice.com
- StarrParalegals – www.starrparalegals.com
- The Virtual Paralegal – www.thevirtualparalegal.com
- Full Service Virtual Support – <http://fullservicesupport.com>

Shared Office Space / Executive Suites

- HQ – www.hq.com
- Alliance Business Centers – www.abcn.com
- businesssuites – www.businesssuites.com

Legal Research and Writing Services

- Lisa Solomon – www.questionoflaw.net
- Outsource2India – www.outsource2india.com/creative-services/writing/legal-writing.asp (If you don’t mind sending your legal work across the globe)
- Prism Legal Consulting – www.prismlegal.com