

Lawyers, Guess What Can Help You Leave the Office at a Decent Hour: Time Management

Summary: Time management can be one of the most important attributes of an attorney's career. Find out why in this article.

As a lawyer you more than likely work tremendously long hours.

But did you know there's a simple well-known and proven process that can help you trim back those hours?

It's called time management, and it's accessible to anyone, including lawyers who look to spend less time at the office.

Time management. It's a fleeting process for many who simply can't see the forest for the trees while wallowing in long workdays.

This, of course, includes lawyers like yourself.

Lawyers are notorious for working long hours that sees them at the firm late in the night, and even on weekends and holidays.

While long hours are a large part of the [law firm culture](#), at the end of the day - whenever *that is* - long hours are unfair not just to a lawyer, but the lawyer's significant other, family and friends.

This is why time management is so crucial to your legal career as is highlighted in this article, authored by Jay Harrington in a recent post on [Attorney At Work](#).

Staying Late at the Office Is a Vicious Cycle

You stay late, you get to bed late, then you get to the office late the next morning, at a time when the emails and phone calls start pouring in; it is, needless to say, a vicious cycle.

You never give yourself a chance to get ahead, get organized, and get the work done when you should. Instead, you do those things when you can --typically at the end of the day when "it's quiet," and after your anxious and soured clients have gone home, finally putting a stop to all the so-called inputs.

The biggest problem is that the end of the day is the worst time to do the deep work that's required to get ahead in your career. Instead of doing what's most important, your day is spent doing what's most *urgent*.

Rather than playing golf, it's like playing tennis, where all you do is return volleys, only to have them fired right back at you.

The truth is, for most people, early morning is the best time to get deep work done. You may not consider yourself a morning person, and the idea of getting in the office at 7 a.m. is anathema. But have you pondered the possibility that the reason the morning is such a drag is that you're exhausted from all the late nights?

You can't burn both ends of the candle. It's unsustainable. So you need to make a choice.

Do You Want a Life, or Do You Want to Spend Your Life at the Office?

In some cases, it isn't until a lawyer steps away from his or her legal career that they appreciate the benefits

of starting work early in the day, although for many that doesn't immediately happen at once.

Harrington, the article's author, agrees: "I used to start working around 9 a.m. When I decided to make a change, I slowly started setting my alarm a bit earlier. Every month I moved my wake-up call back by 15 minutes. It wasn't long before I was starting my workday at 8 a.m., then 7 a.m. Now I get up most days around 4:45 a.m., get a workout in, and sit down with a cup of coffee at my iPad around 6 a.m.

"I've found that I can get more substantive work done from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. than I can from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. The fact that it's better to do important work in the morning is a no-brainer, literally. If you've been working all day in a stressful profession such as the law, by the evening your brain is likely fried, productivity sags, and it's almost certain that you won't be doing your best work."

Start Your Day with a Sprint

Perhaps more important than *when* you start working is *what* you start working on.

Work is like fitness --it's best done in short bursts of intensity, followed by periods of rest and recovery. So, as the author states, start the day with a sprint.

Keep in mind that working in this manner has an added benefit. If you're like most people, your best ideas (just like building muscle) come during periods of recovery, when your mind is free to wander, and not in the midst of an intense work session. By taking the time to recover, you can then apply these "free range" ideas during your next period of work.

According to psychologist Ron Friedman, the key to productivity is leveraging the first three hours of your day. Friedman was quoted in the Harvard Business Review about this point:

"Typically, we have a window of about three hours where we're really, really focused. We're able to have some strong contributions in terms of planning, in terms of thinking, in terms of speaking well."

Don't save your most important work for the end of the day, whether that's writing a brief, practicing a presentation, or strategizing a transaction. Do it first when your mind and body are fresh. Then get up, take a walk and have something to eat.

Reserve your afternoons for meetings, phone calls and email. The perfect way to wrap up the day --hopefully by 6 p.m. --is by spending 15 minutes planning the next morning's to-do list.

That way you can head home with a clear head and your next day already mapped out.

The "Face Time" Myth

If you're a young lawyer you might be thinking: "Yeah, right. There's no way I can leave that early every day. I'm expected to put in face time."

Harrington states that's what he thought for most of his career as an associate:

"Only later did I learn that for most senior lawyers, the concept of face time is an irrelevancy. All that matters is results. If the lawyers who assign you work find you reliable, and have confidence that you'll ask the right questions, exercise good judgment, and meet deadlines, then no one (at least no one that matters) will bat an eye if you're heading for the elevators before the sun sets on a consistent basis."

7 Issues You Should Rectify to Better Manage Your Time While in The Law Firm

The legal website [Thomson Reuters](#) suggests these 7 issues that can challenge and lengthen your day within your law firm:

Issue #1: Taking On Too Much

When you want to help, it's too easy to say "yes" and that's when time management troubles typically begin. You may say to yourself that it's no problem to put in a few extra hours, on top of the extra you're already working. But we are not machines. At some point, your adrenaline will drop, and your body and brain won't keep up. The return on the time you invest diminishes with each minute you overwork yourself. That's not good for you or for your clients.

Saying no doesn't mean you won't ever do it, it simply means you can't take on a new client, for instance, for another six weeks. Or, it may mean delegating a task. Practice how you're going to say "no" so that when that partner walks in to drop another project on a plate that is already overflowing, you're set to respond, "I've got three assignments from three other [attorneys](#) already. Would you be willing to speak with them to see which ones come first?"

This ability to say "no" is absolutely critical if you're on your [way to becoming a star lawyer](#) because everyone will want your time.

Issue #2: Allowing Constant Interruptions

Create a rule that for one or two hours at a set time daily, you will not allow any interruptions - whether that's a phone call or a knock on the office door. Stand firm on this rule. Practice what you will say to people who show up unannounced so that gentle "no" rolls effortlessly off your tongue. Consider something like: "I don't have time to talk right now, but if you come back in an hour, I would be happy to chat with you."

To counter your no-interruption period, you will also want to make sure your schedule isn't back-to-back activity each day. Leave wiggle room so that you can respond to the unexpected outside of your no-interruption hours.

Issue #3: Estimating and Capturing Time Inaccurately

If you consistently work until the wee hours to complete projects at the last minute or find yourself writing off hours, it's critical that you start adding hours to your estimates. Before deciding how much time a project will require, look at everything that's on your plate and analyze how much time similar projects have taken.

While you may be eager to present the best value or impress clients or other attorneys in your firm, be realistic. It's not impressive to submit work later than promised because you overextended yourself or guessed wrong.

Furthermore, it's far more expensive than you may realize to write off time. Consider this: When a lawyer, who charges \$250 an hour, decides not to charge for even one hour a week, they lose \$12,000 a year. By capturing that hour they gain \$12,000.

Issue #4: Procrastinating

Optimizing time begins by not putting work off. If you find yourself procrastinating, think deeply about why. There's a reason behind it and it's often:

Not knowing what to do next. If that's your situation, turn to colleagues or do some research - take even a small step to propel yourself forward.

Not liking the client. Perhaps the client is difficult to work with or doesn't pay. Then maybe it's time to vet clients more thoroughly or be more selective about who you represent.

Issue #5: Doing Everything Yourself

Delegate when you have the opportunity. I find many lawyers, especially new partners, are unwilling to delegate or don't delegate well. Make sure you find the person with the skill set to do the work well, but don't abandon them. Oversee their work without micromanaging.

Issue #6: Being a Perfectionist

Not everything requires 100% of your attention. Consider the Pareto Principle: You get 80% of your outcome from 20% of your effort. Learn what needs to be perfect and what doesn't.

Evaluate and prioritize your to do list. A brief for a corporate client, for instance, will require 100% of your effort. A simple court order, however, may not require you to tweak the language to perfection.

Issue #7: Dismissing Technology

You now have the ability to save yourself and your practice hours every day with [law practice management software](#). You can be more efficient and therefore create more time by simplifying your [matter management](#) and automating your [calendar](#), [billing](#) and document-building activities, while gaining the flexibility to [work from anywhere](#). And the best solutions do so with far more [security](#) than even the biggest law firms.

Conclusion: Let's Get Real

Harrington suggests that it's foolhardy for a lawyer to think they you won't have to work late once in a while. Of course, the best-laid plans will go awry, and some days will be nothing but a chaotic mess. As Mike Tyson famously said, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

In short, try not to make it a habit. No lawyer should accept that each day in a law firm must end in a conference room littered with containers of half-eaten takeout food.

Let's get real: A [legal career](#) is hard. The work is stressful. Adversaries quadruple normal levels of anxiety.

To that end, don't make things harder on yourself by working in a way that is unhealthy and unsustainable. As Harrington states, get up a little earlier, get your work done, then get out of the office and into the world.

With this done, you'll no doubt be a better lawyer --and person --for it.