



# Time's a Wastin'

*A solo practitioner's take on how to stay organized.*

BY JAMES E. BRILL

**RELUCTANTLY, BUT FINALLY, I HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT I WILL NEVER HAVE THE TIME TO DO ALL THE THINGS I SHOULD DO, MUCH LESS ALL THE THINGS I WOULD LIKE TO DO.** There are simply not enough hours in the day, days in the week, or . . . you get the idea.

Although I have a busy law practice, I participate in a fair amount of bar work and other extracurricular interests. I normally can find the time for these activities as well as a way to justify the time and effort spent on them.

Unfortunately, this does not always carry over to my day-to-day law practice. I am often frustrated at how things seem to bog down, even though I have tried to organize my practice, improve my efficiency, and manage my time.

A number of years ago, I made the decision to have my office near my home so that I did not spend long hours

commuting. I figure that each year there are 240 work days (more if you work on weekends and holidays), and that I avoid commuting for an hour a day due to my short drive. This amounts to 240 hours a year—the equivalent of 30 eight-hour days! Think of what could be done with this extra time.

Once I get to the office, I find that, unless I am careful, these extra hours, as well as many of the other hours, will be frittered away by the greatest time-waster of them all—interruptions. I have the most trouble with interruptions from the telephone. Like Pavlov's dog, I salivate whenever the telephone rings. I want to talk, but if I take these calls as they come, I have no large blocks of time. Unfortunately, email is rapidly overtaking the telephone as a time-waster, with the ultimate culprit being the person who calls to ask if I got an email sent five minutes earlier.

And, as bad as the telephone and email are in disrupting my best plans, here comes the social media deluge from Facebook, blogs, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc. Keeping in touch may be great, but being involved in all of it is a lot like being a probationer with an ankle bracelet.

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

I believe in lists. The best lists not only remind you of things to do but also make you aware of priorities. Before going home each evening, I try to list the most important things to do the next day and rank them in order of importance. I try to begin my day by working on the most important task and staying with it until I am done, can do no more, or it is no longer the most important. Only then do I move to the second-most important project. It is the quiet period that makes it possible for me to focus my efforts on these projects and thereby increase my effectiveness.

I try to schedule a couple of uninterrupted hours each day, so that I can focus on research or on document review, analysis, and production. I return phone calls and answer emails when my quiet period is over. Except for those with true emergencies (whose calls I take during the quiet period), I have had few clients who are unwilling to go along with this slight delay. Most realize that I can either talk on the phone or do their work, but I cannot do both at the same time.

Without question, focus and concentration are essential when working on a project. A great example of this is the space program, particularly the NASA Apollo Program. Its mission was to send men to the moon and return them safely. I know several of the Apollo astronauts and was able to observe them as they went through their training. They were focused on their work, to the virtual exclusion of everything else. That focus permeated the space program and was as much responsible for its success as any of the technical skills or equipment.

I am convinced that the ability to concentrate and focus is the secret to time management and that good time management is the secret to a successful law practice. When I am able to concentrate and focus, I am on top of my practice; I am efficient and effective and my productivity soars.

### AVOIDING THE SHUFFLE

In spite of my best intentions and the proliferation of scanning devices, I have incredible difficulty in dealing with paper. As lawyers, we are awash with paper. We receive it or create it. Then we read it, shuffle it, organize it, file it, and retrieve it, but we rarely get rid of it. My rule seems to be to keep it if there is any reason I might need it again. A better rule would be to throw it away if I likely could get a copy elsewhere. Maybe the best rule is, "If in doubt, throw it out!"

My problem with incoming items is that I look at all of them before deciding what to do with any of them, and thus I handle the same documents over and over. Management experts advise us to avoid this paper shuffling by handling each document only once, immediately doing what is necessary, delegating it to someone else, marking it for filing or for later handling on a specified date, or simply throwing it away. By doing just one of these things, so many documents could avoid the pile on my desk.

Every year or so, I try to go through my "active" files and prepare an inventory of the things that need to be done for each particular matter. After this review, I go through the listing and classify them in order of importance (A = most important; B = average importance; C = routine or trivial). Then I rank the "A" matters in their order of importance or urgency and try to complete A-1 before going to A-2 or to A-3, etc. Once again, I find the quiet hour to be invaluable, although it is often necessary to add some weekend time.

The "A" jobs are usually harder, can't be done all at once, and parts of them can't be done very well the first time. The "B" matters are less important and less urgent, while the "C" projects are the easy ones that should be delegated. It is understandable why one would shy away from the challenges of the "A" opportunities and retreat to the ease and security of the "C" projects. Frankly, some of the "A" projects might involve a 50-hour commitment, and because we know we will never have 50 straight hours to work on them, we avoid getting started.

The only way to tackle these projects is to break them down into smaller tasks that can be managed. Remember that the way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time.

The various techniques of time management will give you and me the time to become well prepared, efficient, and productive, and in doing so, will help us to deliver quality services that we have trained so long and worked so hard to provide.

### DO'S AND DON'TS OF TIME MANAGEMENT

- Do concentrate and focus on one thing at a time.
- Do establish deadlines for completing projects.
- Do clarify and establish priorities.
- Do establish procedures for routine and repetitive matters.
- Do learn to say *no*.
- Don't procrastinate.
- Don't jump from one thing to another.
- Don't attempt to do too many things at once.
- Don't leave the job unfinished.
- Don't be a paper shuffler. **TBJ**

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