

COMMENTARY

Working Smarter Helps Attorneys Build More Billable Hours

By Phyllis Sisenwine

Special to the Legal

Few attorneys realize how a professional coach can help you focus your attention and manage your time to become more productive. Attorneys who work with a coach say they suddenly discover the time and space to share challenges and devise strategies for success. A coach can also help partners and associates air previously unspoken issues and loosen workflow logjams by creating a safe haven for conversation and action.

It may be rare for partners and associates to communicate with one another about the challenges of a busy law office. An associate may hesitate to risk looking less-than-smart on issues like client relations and time management. Likewise, a partner may not admit the need for improved organizational skills or prospect follow-up. An experienced coach will tell you in such cases it's the lack of frank conversation — not the lack of hours in a day — that makes it difficult for practitioners to succeed.



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create time to accomplish things that improve quality of life. For more information visit www.thelawyerscoach.com or call 215-968-2424.

Often the press of busy schedules, pending deadlines and unexpected calls generate behaviors that cause attorneys to waste time, curtail billable hours and stymie success. Such actions include: checking emails when you don't have the need; meeting with associates when you should be preparing something for a client; reading emails and taking phone calls simultaneously; and letting unanticipated interruptions disrupt your schedule. On hectic days billable time evaporates. By day's end you realize you haven't produced sufficient billings and you wonder where the day went.

A coach can help you focus on short- and long-term goals while setting

daily priorities to meet those goals. One of the first things a coach can teach you is to start each workday by asking: "What is really important about this day?" Once you establish your daily priorities and delegate certain tasks to others in the office, you'll notice an improvement in billable hours.

It's helpful to identify which daily priorities *must* be completed, including important tasks that must *not* be interrupted. This may mean *not* taking certain telephone calls, *not* constantly checking your email and *not* starting anything else until the list is completed. You will not only realize a sense of accomplishment at the completion of these tasks, but a sense of efficiency in reaching your goals as well.

It's amazing what setting priorities and getting organized can do for your practice, says Debra Speyer, whose Philadelphia firm specializes in elder law and securities fraud. A self-described "overdoer," she wore 15 hats and tried to work on a hundred projects at the same time. Only, she didn't realize how little she did to bring in new business.

Once she worked with a coach, she narrowed the focus of her work to seniors, who she enjoys serving. "I learned to focus my attention on my intentions," she explains. "I always enjoyed working directly with the elderly, protecting their interests and litigating fraud cases. Now, that's exactly what I'm doing, and my business is thriving."

To support this change, Speyer formed a network of attorneys to whom she refers work when it involves cases without interest for her. In return, these attorneys do the same thing for her, handing her cases that don't interest them. By delegating tasks and cases that she doesn't enjoy to others, not only is she happy at work, but she has had time to develop her business.

"It's a win-win for everyone involved," says Speyer, who has worked with a coach for seven years. "I litigate the cases that I like best and other attorneys are doing what they do best, working on the cases that they enjoy."

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Philadelphia lawyer Ralph Pinkus also turned to a coach for help in developing his practice. Prior to coaching he felt inundated with clutter and inefficient, like he was never getting anything done. He seldom delegated small tasks to his paralegal, he recalls, and often jumped from one job to the next and without finishing the first project.

After two years of coaching, he is more organized and reaping the rewards financially. "One of my greatest challenges was to stay focused and directed when conducting a task," Pinkus says. "When I sit down to do something now, I try to finish it and don't allow for interruptions."

Pinkus also has placed additional responsibilities on his paralegal, a change he admits was not easy. "I always wanted to be in control of everything that went on in my office," he says. "It was very difficult for me to give certain things up. But in a law office there are certain things meant for the lawyer to do and certain things for the paralegal to do. I had to stop taking time on the things that weren't meant for me."

Of course, there are times when Pinkus finds himself falling back into old habits, but he doesn't let it go for long, he says, since he enjoys the feeling of accomplishment more than the pain of inefficiency. Recently, he recalls, he'd been putting something off for two weeks. Near the end of the second week, he couldn't take it anymore, so he sat down and tackled the job without allowing any interruptions. The result? He was able to face an upcoming vacation without the stress or distraction of the unfinished project.

Another benefit of reorganizing his workday, according to Pinkus, is he now enjoys his free time more because he's not constantly worrying about facing new ordeals. He already knows what's coming his way because he has established his goals and set his schedule to meet them.

"I find that if I set goals and meet them, I have such a sense of accomplishment," he says. "I feel more efficient and more motivated. Being organized has paid off for me financially because I'm making better use of my billable time and I feel more balanced."

Coaching Tips for Busy Attorneys

- To improve billable time, maintain billing records on a daily basis, rather than on a weekly or biweekly basis. Maintain a good filing system by keeping forms and records together. Keep everything up-to-date.
- To work more efficiently, leave small tasks for others to handle. Be willing to delegate.
- Keep your desk clutter-free.
- Meet with staff and associates frequently. Regular meetings will keep everyone on the same page and allow the office to run smoothly.
- Open your mind and take an honest look at the structure of your day. Decide what works and what doesn't. Then, put your priorities in order.

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