



Four Productivity Building Blocks of Effective, Efficient and Happy Lawyers

Prepared by:
Jay Harrington

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Four Productivity Building Blocks of Effective, Efficient and Happy Lawyers

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Recently I posed this question to lawyers: [“Why are you at the office until 10 p.m.?”](#)

Working late from time to time is an unavoidable consequence of being a lawyer. Still, many lawyers fail to structure their days in a manner that allows them to manage the day’s distractions and get important work done early, rather than late at night. And it’s a big problem: There’s probably no bigger contributor to your unhappiness than the sense that you’ve lost control and your career is consuming your life.

While my last post touched on tips that can help you better manage your days and avoid working at night, I wanted to dive deeper. Here are some techniques that I use, and that I’ve observed others use, to get work done efficiently and effectively while maintaining a balanced schedule.

Consumed? Rethink Your Approach to Productivity

In my previous post, I explained that “work is like fitness – it’s best done in short bursts of intensity, followed by periods of rest and recovery. So start the day with a sprint.”

It’s easy to get into the office and start ticking off the easy stuff. It can be satisfying to immediately dig into email and begin volleying

correspondence back and forth with clients, colleagues and adversaries. It's busywork, and busy feels productive.

The problem, of course, is that the moment you get through your inbox, a new batch of messages is waiting for you. Before you know it, 6 p.m. rolls around and the brief, presentation or transaction that you need to get done for the next day hasn't even been started.

Time management isn't necessarily the issue. At least that's not the lead domino. There's never enough time in the day! No matter how skilled a manager you may be, you can't manage your way through the chaos of your day without understanding the hierarchy of your priorities. In this sense, effective people practice "time curation" as opposed to "time management." They discern. They pick and choose. They prioritize. And then they ruthlessly honor, defend and work in accordance with those priorities.

Here's how they do it.

1. List Building

The best way to establish priorities for the day, week, month or year is to write them down. Making and using lists is the cornerstone of any effective productivity system. You simply cannot expect to keep everything straight in your head, so you need to get it down on paper.

Entire books have been written about the best way to utilize lists, although many take it too far. List building, ostensibly meant to simplify things, can become overly complicated. It's better to put the minimum amount of effort into a list system that will produce the maximum amount of effort.

The Pareto Principle, also known as the 80/20 Principle, stands for the hypothesis that 80 percent of the benefits that most people realize from their various activities are derived from 20 percent of their efforts. When applied to list building, an 80/20 analysis dictates a simple approach.

In my experience, it's best to work from two lists:

1. A "Macro" list identifies big objectives and responsibilities. This may include things like "Write summary judgment motion for xyz case" and "Create personal marketing plan." Each Macro objective or project should then have a number of bullet points identifying the specific tasks necessary to accomplish the objective. Using an application like Evernote to build your list is helpful because it allows you to reorder your list based on deadlines, and remove items when completed or abandoned.
2. A "Micro" list is a daily to-do list that identifies the specific sub-part tasks from the Macro list to be completed on a particular day. As you get more adept at working with your Micro list, you'll learn to not be overly ambitious or under-ambitious about your day's objectives. And if you're doing it right, your Micro list will reflect the most important activities that you should be engaging

in, and not just the most urgent. In other words, you'll be setting priorities.

2. Pomodoro Technique

Once you've set priorities, you can focus on the best ways to accomplish them. We all have the same 24 hours in the day to work with. The question is, how can we get the most done in the least amount of time?

I first learned about a productivity system called the Pomodoro Technique from Tim Ferriss, author of *The Four-Hour Workweek*. It's a system that was developed by Francesco Cirilio and documented in a paper he wrote in 2006. It's a technique based on the "sprint/recover" work philosophy.

Cirilio's big insight was that we can be more effective - often in far less time - if we work like sprinters, rather than marathoners.

I'm not perfect, and sometimes get derailed, but I've experience great results since I've committed to using the Pomodoro Technique. Here's how it works:

- Decide on a task to work on.
- Set a timer for 25-40 minutes.
- Work intensely on the task during the interval.
- If a distraction pops into your head, write it down, but immediately get back on task.

- At the end of an interval, get up and take a short break (5-10 minutes).
- After four intervals, take a longer break (15-30 minutes).

By sprinting, then recovering, you stay focused on the task at hand and sidestep the rabbit holes that lead to a scattershot work approach.

You're probably thinking two things. Once, why the hell is this system called Pomodoro? That's easy. The Italian word for tomato is "Pomodoro" and Cirilio used a tomato-shaped kitchen timer to log his intervals as a university student.

Second, does this thing really work? Yes, remarkably well, but with some caveats. Granted, 25 minutes of work sounds like nothing. But the key thing to remember is that during these intervals you're supposed to be working intensely. No checked emails. No surfing the internet. No chitchatting. No distractions. If you can focus intensely on the task at hand, and shutout all else, you'll be shocked at the volume and quality of your production.

Here's the thing, though: you're a human, prone to distraction, full of emotions and a creature of habit. The Pomodoro Technique may be appealing, but don't dive in too deeply from the start. You've got to give yourself time to adapt to a new way of working. If you haven't been exercising, you wouldn't (or at least shouldn't) start back with a new routine that requires you to complete 500 burpees in 25 minutes. By the same reasoning,

you shouldn't try to get started with Pomodoro by trying to complete 20 intervals per day.

Start slow. That's how new habits get formed.

3. Time-Blocking

List-building is about *what* to work on, the Pomodoro Technique is about *how* to work on it, and time-blocking is about *when* to work on it.

If your calendar resembles the typical lawyer's, it's filled with other people's priorities. These include meetings, phone calls, court appearances and other appointments. It's also random. There's no methodology, other than the existence of an open block of time, that dictates when something should be scheduled.

A more effective way to plan your day is to utilize time-blocking. Time-blocking, like list-building, is about setting priorities. To schedule your day effectively, you need a handle on not just available time, but also on the optimal time to tackle different tasks. Once you gain that understanding, you can then build your calendar in accordance with your priorities.

For example, most people find that morning is the best time to get deep work done. It's when your mind and body are fresh, and your creative juices are flowing. Accordingly, to the extent possible, it's best to block off big chunks of time each morning to engage in the deep work that otherwise gets pushed off to the

evening when the phone stops ringing and emails subside. If you conclude that morning is when you're at your best, your day should be structured to take advantage of your peak performance hours. Don't just tell yourself to do deep work in the morning, take the initiative to block off the time in your calendar so that other distractions – the phone calls, the meetings – don't derail you.

Once you have the time set aside on your calendar, you'll have the windows of free space that you need to work in Pomodoro intervals and see your efficiency and effectiveness soar. Then you can reserve time in the afternoon, when energy starts to lag, for emails, calls and meetings.

Now, I can already hear the objections: "Sure, this sounds great, but it's not realistic to assume that I can block off big chunks of uninterrupted time each morning." I get that. That used to be my excuse, too. But one day I decided that a good plan was better than a perfect one, and did the best I could to stick to a structured schedule that reflected my priorities, and not someone else's. Once I started realizing the benefits of working in this manner, the excuses melted away. My time-blocks for deep work become inviolate.

4. Margin Time

Successful entrepreneurs often talk about the importance of working *on* their business, and not just *in* their business. To grow, entrepreneurs need to focus on the big picture issues that often get pushed aside for the urgent financial and operational

issues of the day. Instead of setting priorities, they play Whack-a-Mole.

To grow in your career, you need to prioritize important, non-billable activities such as business development, marketing and continuing education. But these activities often get overlooked in order to address hot client demands.

One solution is to block off time for these essential activities. While it may not seem possible during the urgency of the day-to-day, by taking a big picture view you'll find that over the course of the year there is plenty of time for personal and professional development within the confines of the workday.

But lawyers often fail to recognize that there is also "margin time" outside of these confines to engage in these activities. Margin time is time spent in the car, on the subway, waiting in line, or walking to lunch that can be utilized to learn and grow.

These days, almost every learning tool is digitized and can be consumed as long as you have a smartphone and a pair of headphones. There are innumerable audiobooks and podcasts available that can provide valuable wisdom and insights on all manner of topics relevant to building a successful legal practice.

If you can find time – at the margins – to tap into these resources, you'll add to your skill set, and also eliminate the stress you feel because you can't seem to fit these "extracurricular" activities into the normal workday.

Putting the Pieces Together

There's no perfect plan when it comes to time management. These techniques, however, can serve as good building blocks for squeezing more effectiveness and efficiency out of your day. The most important takeaway: No one is going to give you your time back – you need to take it back. If you don't set your own priorities, you'll be working according to someone else's. And, if that's the case, that's when you'll find yourself at the office until 10 p.m. way too often. While there's no perfect plan, if your day feels out of control, then there's almost certainly a *better* plan.

What's your day look like tomorrow? I suggest blocking off some time on your calendar to create a list of time management practices that will help you regain control of your workday. A 25-minute focused interval may be all you need to change your life for the better.

Jay Harrington is the owner of [Harrington Communications](#), a leading creative services and business development training agency for lawyers and law firms. He coaches lawyers on how to build powerful personal brands and profitable books of business. Jay is the author of "The Essential Associate: Step Up, Stand Out and Rise to the Top as a Young Lawyer" and "One of a Kind: A Proven Path to a Profitable Practice." Previously, he was a commercial litigator and corporate bankruptcy attorney at Skadden Arps and Foley & Lardner. He writes regularly for Attorney at Work. Follow him on Twitter @attnyatwork.

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