Why Can’t I Get it All Done? Strategies for Increasing Your Productivity

By Anne Dewey-Balzhiser

In the current economic climate, employers are downsizing and expecting the remaining staff to pick up the slack. The resulting job insecurity and larger workloads usually mean increased stress and decreased efficiency for the remaining workforce. Even under normal conditions, productivity is not always optimal. Most of us have had days when all we can do is stare at a pile of assignments or other times when we multi-task our day away without accomplishing anything significant. Lawyers, whose work requires intellectual heft and the exercise of judgment, are more prone to be influenced by obstacles to productivity. It’s important to examine these obstacles and find strategies to overcome them.

What are some of the factors that get in the way of completing assignments?

- Communication technology that creates a continual focus on voice/email/text messages;
- Lots of insignificant tasks that are distracting; and
- Challenging projects that seem overwhelming.

Technology Overload

Technology has introduced many new ways to waste time. Reviewing email, text and voice mail messages can become our job. We can choose to let these tasks fill so much time in our daily schedule that the real work we’ve been hired to do is pushed aside. A city attorney who requested anonymity states that sometimes he has to stop reading email and get away from his desktop to get anything done. “Sometimes the best thing you can do is unplug and work the old-fashioned way, with your head.”

Discipline is the key. Choose specific time periods in the day when you’re going to review your messages and do so only at those times. Irma Robins, University Counsel for the University of Maryland, Baltimore, advises turning off the automatic email message alert. “It’s almost impossible to ignore the reminders and it prompts you to interrupt the task at hand and check your email, which is much less efficient than checking email periodically during the day,” says Robins. When you do check your messages, emails and texts, try to handle as many of these once and only once. If possible, deal with email requests on the day of receipt so that your inbox does not build up. If necessary, file messages in an electronic folder where they can be retrieved. Immediately delete the spam or the ones that need no response. The point is to handle the time wasters as quickly as possible in order to get back to the substantive work you were hired to perform.

The increased use of technology has blurred the boundaries between the office and home. Working overtime hours at home robs us of the opportunity to reconnect with family and friends and to rejuvenate. We remain in “work mode” continuously. The solution is to turn off technology at home so that you are not tempted to check your messages. Unless you have an unusually high level position, messages sent to you in the evening can be answered the following business day.

For those who bring work home every night and then routinely bring it back in the morning, uncompleted, stop! This is a popular crutch for procrastinators—it gives them an excuse for failing to complete their work at the office because they convince themselves they’ll do it at home. It’s a serious time waster habit that may be difficult to break. To do so, it’s important to exert discipline on yourself by going cold turkey—don’t let yourself take any work home. This will force you to be more productive during work hours. With practice, this bad habit can be broken.
Insignificant Tasks or “Gnats”  
Sometimes we have difficulty concentrating on the more challenging assignments because we have too many insignificant but pesky other assignments clamoring for attention. For example, while a brief is staring us in the face, we may also need to reschedule a meeting with opposing counsel, complete an overdue travel reimbursement form or return a call to a staff member from another department.

Because these tasks are not hard to complete, a useful strategy is to make a list of the “gnats” and march down it with conviction, completing every item in turn. Edwin L. Felter, Jr., Senior Judge with the Colorado Office of Administrative Courts, likes to block out a half hour or hour to get them done. He notes that once you get these done, you’ll be surprised at how relieved and energized you feel. “You feel more secure after getting the first layer of tasks out of the way,” says Felter.

Truly Difficult Assignments  
Sometimes projects seem so daunting that it’s hard to know where to begin. Some of the most common obstacles to completing difficult assignments are:

- It’s a novel project calling for creative legal theories;
- It’s intimidating in size or scope; or
- It requires us to undertake tasks that we’re not comfortable handling, such as calling a string of witnesses, or setting up a public hearing.

Often, the key to starting an overwhelming project is to complete one aspect of it, no matter how minor. What happens when we make some headway on a project? My theory is that when we engage our brain to solve a problem, it continues working on that problem at a subconscious level even after we’ve switched to another task. Once we break through our resistance and complete a portion of a major project, we’re more likely to untangle dilemmas, craft insightful ideas, or produce phrases of an argument—our brain will work on the project even when we’re not conscious of it. Then, when we consciously return to the project, the assignment seems easier because we already have some additional ideas on how to tackle it. The key is to take some action on the project so that your brain will continue to “percolate” on the issues.

Another strategy is to give yourself a time frame—say, two to four hours—and make yourself work on a discrete portion of the project. Robins actually makes an appointment with herself by scheduling time on her calendar. This gives her time to analyze the project and make a plan. “[M]aking an appointment for a manageable part of a monster assignment makes it less intimidating. I also find I am less likely to be pulled away from the work at hand because people will check my calendar and see that I have an appointment.”

Robins thinks it’s important to be careful about maintaining balance when using this technique. “I suggest no more than a couple of appointments with yourself in a week, and my appointments never last more than half a day.”

Finally, learn how to prioritize. When Heather Davies Bernard, an assistant general counsel with the Texas Department of Agriculture in Austin, has several high priority projects, she maps out how long they will take, how much research will be needed and how much collaboration, if any, is necessary on each project. She makes a to-do list every evening before she leaves the office. “I find that this approach forces me to constantly evaluate my priorities, as well as the progress that I am making (or not making) on certain projects.” Rather than expend energy worrying about which project to tackle, this approach allows one to concentrate on actually doing the work.

Get It Done!  
Bad work habits are not easy to break, but strategies can be learned and will become routine if practiced regularly. Just as muscles are strengthened with repeated use, so productivity is enhanced by practicing healthy work habits.

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