

Increase Your Productivity and Bill More Time

No matter how many hours you work, the ones that are billed to clients serve as the productivity measure in law firms. If you are a sole practitioner, hours billed represent your income potential. In addition to the financial rewards, more billed time generally means better performance for the individual lawyer. The goal under these standards, then, is to bill more time.

You can increase the billables attributed to you in three ways: (1) improved legal skills, (2) increased leverage of others, if you work in a firm, and (3) better use and capture of the hours you're working. The first and second come with experience. The third will immediately produce results in hours gained, one-tenth at a time. Consider the math:

$$\begin{aligned} &0.1 \text{ (hours)} \times 5 \text{ (days/week)} \times 48 \text{ (work-} \\ &\text{weeks/year)} \\ &= 24 \text{ extra billable hours} \end{aligned}$$

Here are ways to gain more billable hours in the day, six minutes at a time.

Managing E-mail

To gain valuable minutes throughout the day, fine-tune your use of e-mail by taking the following steps.

Turn off new message notifications. These notifications are a huge distraction because they create internal noise: "What am I missing?" or "Oh, not another thing to do!" Or worse, you instantly stop to look at the new message and lose focus on whatever you were doing. Set regular times to check your e-mail to stay abreast of what's happening, but don't watch your inbox constantly.

Remove your work address from personal lists. Keep your inbox uncluttered to reduce the time wasted culling through it. Get rid of automatic feeds that don't relate to work, such as the weather report, the special of the day at your favorite online retailer, and sporting event scores.

Get off unnecessary professional and interoffice lists. These also represent a distraction from your work. Draft a polite, professional e-mail to the list manager asking to be removed if it's not imperative that you receive certain e-mails. Likewise, unsubscribe from e-publications you don't read. Most professional purveyors provide a simple unsubscribe mechanism for this. Take advantage of it. You can always resubscribe.

Spot review your inbox from home. Yes, you're working away from the office after hours, but this is the new professional landscape. If you can quickly reply to simple requests and handle just a few small items in the evening, they'll be on someone else's desk – and not yours – in the morning.

Sequestering

It's not just for juries. The idea is to find a place or process that provides you with uninterrupted time to get top-priority work done. This doesn't mean holing up all day or leaving the country. You're looking for a defined period each day – say one to two hours – when you are able to focus on the tasks of highest concern.

Privatize your office. Close your door and put your phone on "Do Not Disturb." If people continue to interrupt you, put a DND sign on your door. You can make it light – "Great Mind at

Continued on page 2

DISCLAIMER

IN BRIEF includes claim prevention information that helps you to minimize the likelihood of being sued for legal malpractice. The material presented does not establish, report, or create the standard of care for attorneys. The articles do not represent a complete analysis of the topics presented, and readers should conduct their own appropriate research.

Work, Please Don't Knock" or "Out to Work, Back at X:XX O'Clock" – but make it clear.

Establish a secondary workplace. If your firm has a library, go there. If the firm or office building has a small conference or caucus room, go there. Even an empty office will do. Take only the things you're going to work on, and sit down and do them.

Try telecommuting. Consider coming in late or going home early to gain quiet work time one day a week. But remember, if you're going to do this, you must genuinely commit to getting the work done. Any temptation to dally will undermine your objective of increasing performance, so be very careful.

Learn how to say no. Inevitably, you will still be interrupted on many occasions. This is when it is imperative that you politely but unmistakably explain that you're not currently available and you'll get back to the person post-haste when you are. It's an opportunity to retrain those you work with – you are enlisting their help to increase your productivity.

Capturing All Billable Time

The statistics are clear: You can lose 20 percent of your billable time if you don't write it down immediately on completing the work. So track it constantly throughout the day!

Get client/matter numbers at inception. When you're handed a file or you engage in a case-related discussion with another lawyer, ask for the client/matter number up front. This will do two things: (1) make it clear that you're going to bill the time you work; and (2) eliminate the need for you to chase down the number later, which, of course, wastes billable time!

Bill all e-mail correspondence. Copy yourself or your assistant on all e-mails or forward a copy of the e-mail to yourself or your assistant with the client, matter, and billable time in the subject line. Here is your track record of what work you've done. If necessary, the e-mail can be used to help create an entry in the firm's billing program. You did the work, so make sure that it's captured.

Complete your daily timesheets by day's end. The best practice is to keep a running log of time (software-based or otherwise) of everything you do as you do it. If you're a paper person, then you need to aggregate and compile the list for your billing program before leaving the office that day. Even if your memory rivals that of the elephant, you will miss things if you don't do this every single day. Recall our earlier math – one missed tenth of an hour each day translates to 24 lost hours a year.

Implementing some or all of these suggestions will definitely increase your productivity. Better productivity will improve your compensation and sense of accomplishment. In turn, your increased accomplishment will produce greater career satisfaction – and the extra cash you gain in the process won't hurt either.

PAUL BURTON
VISION MECHANIX LLC

Paul Burton is a former corporate finance attorney and software executive. He works exclusively with lawyers and law firms, providing practice management consulting, training, and coaching. Paul can be reached at www.visionmechanix.com.