



Allison C. Shields Legal Ease Consulting, Inc.
Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com

Preventing “Lawyer Meltdown” and Creating Productive, Profitable and Enjoyable Law Practices



Where Does the Time Go?

By Allison C. Shields, Esq.

Somehow, it always seems like there's not enough time to get everything done. And the truth of the matter is that no matter how hard we work, there will always be more to do. If we don't have client work, there's networking, planning, social media, marketing, etc., not to mention spending time with family and friends and engaging in activities we enjoy.

In order to be successful, you need to focus on two things: being efficient and being effective:

- Being efficient means doing things the *right way*.
- Being effective means doing the *right things*.

Time is wasted due to a combination of inability to identify the right activities (inability to say no, lack of direction, interruptions, etc.) and an inability to perform those activities efficiently (procrastination, ineffective delegation, lack of organization, etc.).

There's no such thing as multitasking

You probably think that you're being productive or getting a lot done if you're multitasking. But the truth is that you can't accomplish two things which require you to expend mental energy at once. You can only do one at a time. In actuality, you're

constantly switching between one activity and another. In his book *The Myth of Multitasking*, Dave Crenshaw calls this “switchtasking.” (The book is a fabulous one, and I recommend it to everyone – and it’s a quick read, too).

Switchtasking is rapidly switching between two or more tasks

Switchtasking costs time and damages relationships. Think about it: have you ever walked into someone’s office (or been called to their office) only to have them checking email or going through documents while they’re talking to you? How did that make you feel? Do you think that person was really listening to you? Have you ever done that to someone else?

How about checking email while you’re on the phone? Were they both being done to the best of your ability? Were you really listening to the other caller? Did you have to return to the email after the call anyway?

Switchtasking will always cost you time – you will always be less effective if you are “multitasking” then if you focus on one thing at a time.

On occasion, you can do more than one thing at a time – if only one of those things require mental energy – such as folding laundry while watching TV, listening to music while on the treadmill, etc. Crenshaw calls this “background tasking.” One task is the main focus while the other occurs in the background and doesn’t require your direct attention.

Before you decide to answer that phone or wave that associate or assistant into your office, ask: “What will the switching cost be of this interruption?”

Minimize unplanned activities

Do you have a plan for the day, or do you constantly just react? If you’re just reacting, you aren’t getting the most important things done. The alternative is

planning – before every day begins, you should know what you plan to accomplish. Schedule specific time to get tasks accomplished – particularly tasks which don't have built-in deadlines.

Use the “power of three” to your advantage

Decide which three items are the most important and focus on those items or initiatives. Let's face it – there's no way we can all do everything we'd like to do for our practice. If you've determined that your three priorities for the next six months include focusing on a new practice area, improving your client service and developing your website, it will be easier to reject other 'wish list' items as they come along. If they don't fall into your three areas of focus, put them on the back burner.

Other techniques for minimizing unplanned activities include:

- Prioritizing your activities so that you can concentrate your efforts on those items that require your specific skills, knowledge, expertise or personal touch
- Developing 'office hours' or specific meeting times for staff with whom you must interact regularly or whom you must supervise
- Creating 'no-call zones' which will provide blocks of uninterrupted time for focused work

Start every day with one activity in mind that you must accomplish. To be sure it's the right one, ask yourself, "If I accomplished just this item today, would I be satisfied with my day?"

Eliminate distractions and unnecessary activities

Which activities can you get rid of? Get rid of anything that you don't have to do. Some tasks can be eliminated entirely. Others can be delegated.

Knowing your strengths and weaknesses can help you to determine what you should delegate. Anything that you avoid doing, hate doing or just don't do well is a potential candidate for delegation. If someone else can do it better, faster, more consistently, delegate it. Delegate it if someone else will get it done well enough (as opposed to keeping it on your 'to do' list where it never gets done).

The “don't do” list

One of the reasons many lawyers get discouraged and feel overwhelmed is that they keep one long 'to do' list and there's no way that they'll be able to accomplish all of the tasks on that list. They continue to carry the same things on their 'to do' list day after day. There's no sense of accomplishment, because they see the same tasks carried from one day to the next, over and over.

Create a 'don't do' list in which you eliminate unnecessary items or activities that don't serve you or that can be done by someone else. You may decide that you will no longer answer your own phone so that you won't be distracted constantly. Even if you're a solo, there are outsourced alternatives.

Staff interruptions

Crenshaw points out that often staff will take up additional time because they aren't sure when they will have your attention again; you're always too busy or you're out of the office too much. It may appear that your staff is making things up or trying to remember what to talk to you about. They may seem unprepared. That's because they're not sure when they might have another chance to talk to you. Once they have your attention, they are afraid to let it go, because it is so difficult to get your attention in the first place.

You must give staff a clear when that they can count on:

- Recurring meetings with those who are accountable to you or have regular questions
- Clear expectations of availability/office hours

According to Crenshaw, it isn't unavailability that causes the interruptions – it's uncertainty. Having been on both sides of this one, too, I tend to think that he might be right.

In the same way that you have to train your clients and set expectations with them, you need to train your employees and set expectations, not only for their level of performance, but also for your availability. When they know that they will have access to you at a specific time, they are more likely to hold questions. And they may actually learn how to resolve some issues on their own.

Technology interruptions

Take control of your technology – very few of the following interruptions: telephone calls, the cell phone, email alerts, direct messages – are actual emergencies. Schedule times for technology. Just because you have a cell phone doesn't mean you should be always available. It doesn't serve you or your clients (with very limited exceptions, such as, possibly, criminal law).

Remember: switching damages relationships. If you take a client's call when you're distracted, you may be worse off than you would have been just allowing the client to leave a message or get help from someone else in your office.

Don't let time get away from you - make sure you take control of what you focus on during the day, rather than letting it take control of you. And stop fooling yourself thinking that you're multitasking and that you're getting a lot done. Studies have proven that it just isn't true.

Do you want to improve your firm but don't know how or where to start? Do you know what you want to do, but can't find a way to get it done? [Contact me](#) to see how I can help.

About the Author

Allison C. Shields, Esq., President of Legal Ease Consulting, Inc., is a former practicing attorney and law firm manager who helps law firms create more productive, profitable and enjoyable law practices by providing practice management and business development coaching and consulting. Contact her at Allison@LegalEaseConsulting.com, visit her website at www.LawyerMeltdown.com or her blog, www.LegalEaseConsulting.com.

