



10 Ideas for Working More Effectively in Your Legal Practice

By Jay H. Dushkin
Illustration by Gilberto Saucedo

After graduating from law school, I went to work for a Houston law firm with the goal to work hard and make partner as fast as I could. After five years of hard work, I became a partner. But during those years, I also became a husband and a father of three children. I found myself trying to figure out how to stretch my time and energy to meet the needs of both my career and my family. This article is written for all lawyers who struggle to balance work, family, and personal time.

Over the course of 23 years, I discovered a few simple tricks that have worked well. Some are time-management tools, some are strategies for business development, and some relate to client relationships and prac-

tice. Consistently applying these ideas with a little discipline, I have received more job satisfaction and success from the time I spend practicing law, and I have more time for my family and myself.

Learn To Say No

I went to a time-management course about 15 years ago and took away one piece of valuable advice: say “no” to any commitment that does not fit and further your current priorities for work, family, or personal growth. At the time, I served on several community committees. Most nights I was not getting home before 9 p.m. My service was important, but at that time in my life, being

with my family was more important. As my terms on the committees expired, I didn’t renew them. With the time I got back, I happily coached my boys in baseball and managed their teams for many years.

Remember that your goals and priorities will change over time. Periodically evaluate your time commitments to see if they fit your current wants and needs.

Join A Network Group — Be Selective, Be Active

Over 21 years ago, I chose a networking group from an ad in the local paper. I didn’t know anyone at my first meeting, but over the years, many group members became clients, referral sources, and friends. In fact, my time was so well spent that I joined an additional group five years ago.

The right network group is an invaluable resource for business and personal growth and support. Be selective: both of my network groups accept only one member from each type of business or professional specialty and meet once a week. Both groups regularly bring in speakers with helpful ideas and information. Be active: the adage “you only get out what you put in” applies.

Develop Loyal Clients

About 80 percent of my business comes from clients that have been with me for many years. Instead of chasing after new business, I put my effort into treating my loyal clients at all times as if they were new. As a result, I get job satisfaction and regular income, as well as new business, from these clients.

I make an effort to stay in regular contact with loyal clients; I keep up with their families. I try to take them to sports games or other activities in which we have a mutual interest. Since many of my clients have become friends, I want to be successful for them and for their businesses, employees, and families. In return, they regularly send me work as well as new clients who come into my office for the first time already thinking highly of me.

Delegate

It was not easy for me to learn to delegate, but the results have been tremendous. I am free to do things that really matter and that no one else can do. It is the only way to provide cost-effective service to a client.

I delegate everything that I don't need to do personally. To help me monitor the work I've delegated, I keep a computer list, constantly updated, that shows the tasks, the client, the person responsible for doing the item, and the deadline by which the thing needs to be completed or monitored.

Billing

I review every bill to evaluate the fair value of my work to my clients. I strive to treat my clients as I would want to be treated. I will reduce a bill if the charges seem too expensive for the project. I sleep better at night knowing I sent out a fair and equitable bill (my clients sleep better, too).

Clients appreciate clear, descriptive, and accurate bills; they are offended by mistakes in the bill. I have also found that charging for small amounts of postage or copying is counterproductive. Clients find the charges irritating and it takes excessive time for my staff to bill them.

Monitor Client Referrals

Written office procedures and systems generally allow you to work smarter, not harder. I use a referral checklist procedure that has been particularly helpful in developing business. By using the checklist to track potential clients and identify referring sources, I am able to figure out who to

thank and can easily identify the quality of the evaluating source.

Develop Proficiency in Specific Areas

I found that it's also helpful to focus on areas of law that you are generally interested in. Learn as much as you can about the particular subject. The three areas of practice that now account for about 30 percent of my practice are collection of judgments, enforcement of foreign and sister state judgments, and defending student loan hardship proceedings in bankruptcy court. By practicing areas of law I know I am interested in, I get the satisfaction of practicing in areas I know well and am good at and achieve positive results for my client. Because of my enthusiasm and success, I receive referrals in these areas from other attorneys.

Goal Setting

About five years ago, I began to write my goals down and set a timetable for their accomplishment. As a result, I began to see measurable progress both at home and in my business. It has been fun and rewarding to see what and how much I have accomplished.

I review and update my goals every few weeks. I find it helpful to make a few of my immediate goals easy to accomplish — reaching those low-hanging fruits helps me feel good and gives me the motivation to keep going. I also create a list of goals every December for the upcoming year.

Accountability Groups

Being accountable to others motivates me to make progress. About two years ago, I joined a group of non-competing business people who meet monthly to discuss their progress in meeting goals since the prior month's meeting. We also discuss our successes, challenges, opportunities, and commitments. We discuss what we expect to accomplish by the following meeting. This group gives me a level of accountability that I did not have before and has spurred me into action. I would recommend an accountability group, in some form, to any person or business who sincerely wants to make progress.

Perfectionism

One of the biggest obstacles I encountered in my daily job was my tendency to be a perfectionist. I resisted implementing systems and ideas in my business until they were perfectly conceived or completed. But I even-

tually learned that the time I spent trying to achieve perfection was not justified by the result. I learned that when it comes to making progress, simply getting started is critical.

The ten ideas in this article have worked for me personally. Try even one or two of them. You may need to adapt the ideas to your own practice, but you should find them rewarding; better results from your work time and more job satisfaction.

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