



Practice Development

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Strategies for Getting Organized and Staying Efficient to Get You Home on Time

I've never heard a senior attorney upset that a junior lawyer worked too much unless it was spending too long on a single task or matter. Profitability is an essential characteristic of a well-rounded lawyer, so this makes sense. But the amount of time spent at work doesn't always yield the same amount of time billed, which also makes sense. It takes time to eat lunch or chat with a colleague, and in nearly seven years I've not found a way to completely eliminate work-related but non-billable tasks, *i.e.*, drafting and editing billing entries! The tendency to work more hours and more often, though, makes little sense when there are ways to work smarter. Recognizing this is the first step in allocating time to personal obligations and interests without shortchanging work product or keeping absurd hours. Here are a few strategies that could help you structure your workday to maximize productivity, make it to family dinner on time, and avoid weekend work.

- **Comprehend the Assignment:** I take notes in the same legal pad and store old pads in the same place for easy access later. A buzzword or phrase I jotted down often jogs my memory, especially after days or weeks have passed since the initial discussion. If that happens to you, re-clarify expectations. The initial goal or strategy may have changed, or maybe you see now that you didn't understand the first time around. Seeking clarification of a point or fact is a good way to avoid admitting you didn't understand the first time. At the end of any meeting, repeat back your understanding. Any confusion will be corrected and will prevent the more significant mistake of doing the wrong work. Avoid guessing what strong work product will look like. Ask directly instead. Your reinvented wheel is not likely to turn out better than the original – at least not on the first go. It's better to find an example and improve from there. Reinventing and spinning wheels kill efficiency.
- **Understand the Deadline:** Deadlines are as important as the substantive work and figuring out time constraints is critical to planning for other business. Are you up against an inflexible filing deadline or client-required 30-day report? Is it an arbitrary deadline to keep a matter on track? Did you mistakenly self-impose a deadline? This is challenging if your boss conveys each assignment like it must be your top priority. Try to be clear about the real expectation so you aren't always operating under a false sense of urgency, and so that truly urgent matters can be prioritized. This helps avoid repeated long days and sleepless nights unless they're truly necessary. Be reasonable and strive to get tasks done as soon as possible, but avoid over-promising and under-delivering.
- **Plan Realistically:** There is not much that grates a supervisor more than saying you'll have something at a certain time and not having it. Your boss and support staff may be planning their own schedules around their expectation of a deadline. If you are courteous of their time, they will more likely be courteous of yours. Complexity aside, plan as



if the task is due 24-48 hours earlier than it is, whenever possible. Unless the deadline is urgent, court-imposed, or client-driven, your boss will have other work to do and you don't want anyone waiting on you. Under-promise and over-deliver. If you consistently do it the other way around people will justifiably lose confidence in your abilities.

- **Calendars and Dockets:** I keep an electronic calendar and a paper planner. The electronic calendar is official—updated with court dates, depositions, anything related to court proceedings, but there is sometimes a brief lag-time while waiting for stamped orders or final deposition notices, so I enter all dates into my hard copy immediately. When dates and deadlines are finalized and appear in my electronic calendar, I add them to or check them against my paper calendar. It might be overkill, but I've never missed a court status or other appointment doing it this way. You also never know when your phone, tablet, or laptop might unexpectedly crash.
- **To-Do List/Email Labeling:** This will help you keep all of your cases and assignments straight. My to-do list includes a list of cases, pre-litigation matters, non-billable assignments, and a column for any billing appeals to be sure of timely submission. Err on the side of being over inclusive. Email labeling is also a nice trick for when you need to find that one email you know you sent but you've sent hundreds or thousands of emails to the same person or on the same matter and all have the same subject line with matter name/number or case name/number. This trick has saved me more than once.
- **Leave Work for Tomorrow:** Sometimes it's good to remember that you need work for tomorrow, too. Starting a new task at the end of an already long day may mean a longer overall completion time, and there is a greater chance of rushed work product. Learn to recognize when the project is not urgent, and you're drained. Not only will this help you get home on time, but you're likely to be more efficient and produce a stronger work product in the end.

About the Author

Glenn A. Klinger is an attorney in the Chicago office of *SmithAmundsen LLC*, where he concentrates his practice on insurance coverage disputes involving commercial and professional policies. He also litigates commercial and bad faith cases, and advises clients on issues related to risk management and transfer. Mr. Klinger serves as the Vice-Chair of the IDC Educate Pillar.

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