

VIEW POINT

LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

Realistic approaches to becoming more productive in practice

Q: I've been feeling frustrated with my work habits as a solo practitioner. I have so much to do, and I always get to the urgent and crucial items for handling my cases, but on administrative tasks, marketing (which is really important since I'm just scraping by), and the like, I've been absolutely inefficient. Several times I've told myself that I will get up at 6 a.m., get to the gym, and then hit the office running by 8:30 a.m. and churn out the work, but for some reason I continue to stay up late and these plans quickly fade. The day goes by and it often seems as if I spent more time visiting distracting websites than making inroads on the pile of work. What's the trick to productivity?

A: The trick is that there's no trick. When it comes to avoiding the "pile of work," the pile is probably too large, and avoiding it is probably a huge relief. It would be useful to devote some time to simply listing all the things in the "to-do pile," and then (and this is important) breaking the large elements into smaller and small bits, until they are so small that you can choose to do them even when every fiber of your being wants to do something else. Do one of those small bits, and then reward yourself (for example, with a

walk, a nap, or a brief visit to a fun web site. You would withhold such rewards from yourself until you've completed the designated piece of work. Fairly soon, you are likely to be tackling larger chunks and getting more done per sitting. Be sure to remind yourself how great it feels to have fewer tasks still hanging over your head.

When you engage in more directly rewarding activities, like the fun website, nap or other treat, do that – and all non-work-related things – somewhere other than where you do your work. The idea is to condition yourself so that being in that setting (that office, or at least that desk) is linked with work and little else. Even non-work-related phone conversations would best be relocated to a different environment. Skipping to distracting websites would require that you leave the office. That'll be tough, but worth it.

Finally (for our purposes here, though this is of course not an exhaustive list of things you might do), your idea that you're going to start going to bed and getting up early in the morning may not be realistic if you've always been a night owl. We support the idea of including exercise in your day, but huge changes in routine are unlikely to persist. Build in an awareness of your natural daily rhythms and energy cycles; work with those, rather than

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against them, toward incremental changes that you have a chance of maintaining until they eventually become your “new normal.” It may help to review and monitor this project with someone else. For some people, that could be a “coach” (and LCL or LOMAP may be able to refer you to someone of that nature); for others, it may be a peer with whom you share a mutual process of monitoring and support. Persistence and building new routines one brick at a time are more likely to pay off

than expecting to implement a big change all at once.

Questions quoted are either actual letters/e-mails or paraphrased and disguised concerns expressed by individuals seeking assistance from Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers. Questions for LCL may be mailed to LCL, 31 Milk St., Suite 810, Boston, MA 02109; e-mailed to email@lclma.org or called in to (617) 482-9600. LCL's licensed clinicians will respond in confidence. Visit LCL online at www.lclma.org. ■