



What Lawyers Can Learn From Dentists About Solo Practice

Last week I went in for my regular dental cleaning, and it reminded me that we can learn a thing or two about how these professionals manage their solo practices.

Consider the typical dental office: the dentist is a sole practitioner who usually employs two or more hygienists and at least one receptionist/secretary. He or she has the latest technology, outsources his or her billing, and is closed on Fridays. When you arrive, you are greeted, then escorted to a dental chair where you can watch a relaxing slideshow or listen to soft music over headphones. Most of your time is spent with the hygienist. The dentist oversees the work, but uses his or her time very judiciously, delegating as much responsibility to staff as possible.

What can lawyers learn from this model?

Hire Friendly, Competent Staff and Delegate!

Many lawyers put off hiring staff because they are afraid of the overhead. While this can be a valid concern, be sure you know the true value of your time – and the true value of staff's time – before you conclude that you can't afford to hire help.

The latest surveys for [lawyers](#) and [staff](#) in Oregon document the following:

- Average billable rate for an Oregon attorney: \$213 per hour
- Hourly salary for entry-level staff: \$11.49-\$17.24
- Hourly salary for legal secretaries: \$18.19-\$26.82
- Hourly salary for paralegals: \$21.79-\$32.08

What does this data reveal? For every hour of work the lawyer performs, staff can perform 6.5 to 18 hours for the same value.

Granted, these numbers do not include taxes and other benefits. Even so, it is easy to see why a lawyer who spends time doing non-billable tasks (filing, billing, running errands) is losing money. Dentists delegate so they can focus their time on work *only they can do*. Lawyers should do the same. Salaries can easily be recouped by giving staff billable projects. As little as two to three hours per day of billable time can cover a full day's compensation (salary, benefits, and taxes combined).

Beyond the numbers, dentists have also learned the intangible benefits of hiring friendly, competent employees. At a time when poor customer service seems to be the norm, clients can't help but be impressed when they are personally greeted and put at ease. When you're in conference or out of the office, staff add to your professionalism. Instead of accumulating messages in voicemail, a real, live person can help your clients by relaying and taking information. If you were a client, which would you prefer?

Embrace Technology

Lawyers are often the last to adopt new technology, which is truly a shame. Some even flaunt it. I spoke to a lawyer just the other day who proudly told me he was still using WordPerfect 5.1 for DOS.

By contrast, dentists embrace technology. Some of it is profession-specific, but some is not. When I sat down in the examining chair for my appointment, the hygienist greeted me and asked how I had been. In short order, she efficiently pulled on a headset. With the words "start listening" she began dictating her findings into my digital dental record.

Lawyers can learn from this example, and thankfully more than ever are interested in exploring the [advantages of digital dictation](#). Read about electronic recordkeeping and going paperless at our [Web site](#). Select Practice Aids and Forms, then Technology. *See Also, [Is It Time to Go Paper-Less?](#)*

Taking Fridays Off

I've been told that dentists are taught in dental school to close their office on Friday, and it has been my personal experience that they heed this advice.

If you do try to run your office without staff, or if you have minimal staff, you will find that you need "catch up time." One way to achieve this is to avoid scheduling appointments or making commitments on Fridays. While there may be a few unavoidable times when you can't stick to this plan (the occasional Friday court appearance comes to mind), giving yourself one day out of five to take care of administrative work or attend to files uninterrupted will go a long way toward keeping your personal life and practice in reasonable balance.

When I started at the PLF over 13 years ago, one of the first lawyers I met took Fridays off. He described it as self-defense. Before changing his schedule, he had been scrambling to take care of his aging parents. Most every week there were doctor appointments, prescriptions to pick up, or other errands to run. His schedule was chaotic and stressful. After missing some

deadlines, he realized he had to make a change. Closing the office on Fridays made all the difference in the world. Existing clients were understanding of the change. New clients took the schedule in stride.

We all need time to rejuvenate, meet personal obligations, or just catch up from time-to-time. Follow the dentist's example, and give yourself the gift of taking Fridays off – even if you only do it once in a while.

Posted in [Client Relations](#), [Staff](#) | Tags: [Beverly Michaelis](#), [digital dictation](#), [Hiring](#), [Oregon law practice management](#), [paperless](#), [Staff](#), [staffing](#), [Technology](#), [time management](#)

Originally published at <http://oregonlawpracticemanagement.wordpress.com/2009/12/11/the-best-of-solo-by-choice-getting-paid-and-maximizing-revenue/> October 20, 2009. Edited for posting on JD Supra December 11, 2009.
Copyright 2009 Beverly Michaelis