



Spring Cleaning for Office Systems

Last week I wrote about the [importance of spring cleaning your office systems](#) – stepping back and taking a fresh look at how you run your practice. This week I encourage you to apply the same principle to your work [habits](#).

Let's face it: we all get stuck in a rut from time-to-time. We follow the same routine day after day without question. Depending on the routine, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. For example, following a set procedure for processing mail, docketing deadlines, or checking conflicts is an important malpractice avoidance technique. The problem arises when we form work [habits](#) that are self-defeating or even life-threatening.

Last week [CNN](#) and other news outlets reported the results of a new study from the [Annals of Internal Medicine](#). For those of you who champion working hard and putting in long hours, I hope it is a wakeup call. The study found that "People who work an average of 11 or more hours per day have a **67 percent higher risk of suffering a heart attack** or dying from heart disease than people who work a standard seven- to eight-hour day. Those who work between 10 and 11 hours per day have a 45 percent higher risk."

While deadlines may sometimes dictate longer hours, sitting in your chair for 10 or 11 hours a day shouldn't be the norm. Long hours translate to physical stress, little or no time to exercise, and eating habits that are often less than stellar (like grabbing fast food on the way home.) The truth is that none of us can maintain a "7-7-7 schedule" (7:00 am to 7:00 pm seven days a week) without suffering the consequences.

If I am describing you, please take this opportunity for a fresh start. There are ways to cut back the amount of time spent in the office and still accomplish what you need to get done:

- Learn to say "goodbye" and "no." If you are overwhelmed by the amount of work you have it means you can afford to be more particular with client and case selection. Review your current client list for matters you regret taking. If feasible, [say goodbye to those clients](#). [Then take your new found insight and apply it to future matters by screening out cases](#) that aren't a good match for you.
- Next, ask yourself: what do *you* want to make a priority? Create time that is sacrosanct to tackle these items by [blocking out time on your calendar](#). Treat this time as if it were a client appointment – take no calls, do not read e-mail, and give the matter your [undivided attention](#).

- [Banish interruptions and multi-tasking. The idea that we can juggle ten things at once is a myth - we simply can't do it.](#)
- Learn to shape and manage client expectations – from the very simple (availability by phone, ability to accommodate unscheduled appointments) to the more complex (meeting client deadlines). The [Professional Liability Fund](#) offers sample client brochures that explain office and billing practices. From the [PLF](#) home page, select Practice Aids and Forms, then Client Relations. On the more complex side of managing expectations, learn to check your calendar first before making a time-related promise to a client. If there is no “deadline” per se, determine when you can reasonably fit the project into your schedule. You gain nothing by promising a quick turnaround if you can't keep your word. And if you're in a pickle – a deadline is approaching and you know you can't meet it – start triaging. Call your client and opposing counsel if necessary and negotiate a new date. Consider whether you need temporary staff or a contract attorney to get matters back under control.
- Remember you can always ask for help. The [Oregon Attorney Assistance Program](#) provides free and confidential support for lawyers who are “time challenged.”
- Last but not least, ditch the guilt of leaving early – it is your well-deserved reward for good planning and efficient work habits.

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