

**Take (back) your time!**  
**How legal professionals can control “noise”**  
**And be more productive in the workplace**

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There are only so many hours in a workday. We like to think that we are in control of our time during those hours -- but most of us, in fact, are not. Slowly but surely, we have ceded control of our time to “noise” in our workplace environment.

Every interruption at work – the ping of an electronic device, the juggling of multiple demands, the time spent chatting with a friendly colleague – takes focus from the task at hand. You feel busy -- but you’re not getting much done. You are confusing activity with productivity.

In order to be focused and productive, most lawyers and other legal professionals need to take back their time – setting aside a certain amount of quiet time within their “noisy” electronic, interpersonal and physical environments.

“By following a few simple steps to control routine interruptions, you can gain six extra minutes of productivity each day – or three full work days each year,” said Paul Burton. “This saves not only measurable time – but also immeasurable focus.”

Paul Burton is a lawyer and a nationally recognized expert on workplace productivity. He developed the QuietSpacing® productivity method and is author of *QuietSpacing: Conquering E-mail, Mastering Work Loads & Achieving Balance*. He regularly speaks, trains and coaches on this subject, and also blogs at [www.quietspacing.com](http://www.quietspacing.com).

Burton discussed productivity before the monthly educational meeting of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association ([www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain](http://www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain)), held Jan.11 at the Four Seasons Hotel in downtown Denver.

*Quieting electronic “noise”*

The electronic office has brought many benefits to the practice of law, but has irrevocably changed its pace and its “noise” level. Thanks to the Internet, we are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year – at our desks or on the move.

The few seconds it takes to respond to each distracting ping or vibration of an electronic device may not seem like much, but when you multiply it by the average of 100 emails a working person gets each day – and then add in social media and other alerts – it adds up.

“The trick is to learn how to leverage email as an important tool without becoming enslaved to it,” said Burton. “Turn off the distracting ‘ping’ and then set a certain time – perhaps once an hour, or as often as you see fit – to scan and process your emails in a batch. Do the same with your telephone ringer.

“In the days before email, you wouldn’t make a separate trip to the mailbox for each piece of mail,” said Burton. “You would bring in the whole batch and process it at the same time. The same rule should apply to your emails. Batch-processing a task is much more productive than serial processing it.”

Other tools to avoid email distraction include:

Restrict each email you send to one subject, which allows it to be filed appropriately by the receiver for easy retrieval and reference.

Make your subject lines as specific as possible, so that the receiver knows what the email is about – and where to file it. Never leave them blank or vague.

Minimize the use of the ‘reply all’ function, in order to decrease the burden on your colleagues’ inboxes (and time) and your firm’s hardware.

Learn how to drag emails into your appointments and tasks functions (in Microsoft Outlook), where it will be copied into the “comment” area for that appointment or task.

### *Quieting task “noise”*

Multitasking – so common in today’s workplace – is the bane of the productive professional. “The same task can take twice as long when you are being constantly interrupted,” said Burton.

“Juggling too many ‘to do’ tasks in our minds is yet another kind of ‘noise,’” said Burton. “Conduct regular ‘core dumps’ – preferably by intelligent use of the tools available in Outlook – that allow you to comfortably focus on one task at a time – without the constant nagging fear that you are forgetting something.”

The core of QuietSpacing®, in fact, is a structured system to organize a vast quantity of work inputs in this way.

“Prioritize your tasks by specific due-date (not ‘asap’), identify the tasks assigned for a given day, and focus all of your attention on those tasks (‘all you command’) for the duration of the allotted time,” said Burton. “When you have finished the substantive portion of your day, select and complete ‘just one more thing’. You will be amazed at how much you accomplish over time.”

Another simple but useful tool is to have just one screen open on your computer at a time. Multiple screens or monitors introduce ‘noise’ that disrupts your focus and productivity.

### *Quieting calendar “noise”*

Mismanagement of the hours in your workday leads to a loss of control over your productive time – especially when faced with the inevitable and unpredictable train wrecks that are part of any practice. “You can only control what you schedule,” said Burton. “The rest of your day just happens to you.

“Each day, calendar four hours to deal with the tasks you have scheduled for that day,” said Burton. “Review and lay them out at the start of the day, before checking your emails (which can throw you off track). Survey and measure progress on ‘all you command’ again at mid-day and at the end of the day.”

“Also, schedule short breaks throughout the day in which you do something unrelated to work -- to clear and re-boot your brain for the next task,” said Burton.

### *Quieting meeting “noise”*

Meetings are a common cause of interruption to a workday. The secret is to control the time devoted to meetings – rather than letting it control you.

“If you are in charge of a meeting, reduce the time you think that you will need by 25 percent,” said Burton. “Distribute all materials ahead of time so that attendees do not have to read them during the meeting. Do not just rattle on with the meeting content. Ask questions and elicit answers from attendees, so that they will remember what happened in the meeting and also need to ask fewer time-consuming questions.”

Schedule enough time between meetings to allow for time overruns and to provide time after the meeting to capture and manage what happened in the meeting. “If meetings start on the hour, schedule them for 45 minutes rather than the entire hour,” said Burton.

### *Quieting workspace “noise”*

A constant source of “noise” is the workplace environment itself -- both physical and interpersonal. “Research shows that, even when we think we are focused on one task, our brain is constantly distracted by the unconscious processing of the stimuli that fall within our peripheral vision,” said Burton.

“Your designated workspace should be completely clear of everything except the one task you are working on,” said Burton. “If your desk is cluttered, move to a completely empty ‘work table’ – either in your own office or, if you find it hard to focus in your own office, in sequestered space elsewhere -- like a meeting room or a ‘guest office’ set aside for visiting clients.”

One simple tactic is to locate your dedicated work area in such a way that you are facing away from any door (which should be partially or completely closed) or window in your office. “If you are not tempted to lift your eyes to see who is walking by or tune your ears to listen to passing conversations, you will have better focus,” said Burton. “If those walking by do not make eye contact and see your friendly smile, they will be less likely to stop by and interrupt.”

Burton recommends that lawyers and other legal professional establish core ‘working hours’ when they are not to be interrupted and more flexible ‘office hours’ when interruptions are allowed. “Let your staff and colleagues know that you appreciate ‘batched’ questions all at once, rather than serial, multiple interruptions,” said Burton.

“Noise” is a necessary part of any modern workplace. Do not be enslaved by it. Quiet this noise and become more productive as a legal professional by taking control of your electronic devices, tasks, schedule, meetings and workplace environment.