Law Firm Productivity

Everything You Need to Know to Save Time and Boost Profits

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Introduction

For lawyers, time is clearly money. To achieve success, you've got to be efficient and find the best practices that make you and your firm as productive as possible. Of course, that's often easier said than done.

The key to productivity is not only about managing your time, but it's also about finding the right associates and making sure they're managing their time as well. Just implementing a few small changes can make a huge difference. Think about it: If you even bill for an extra five minutes a day, that's more than 30 hours per year!

So how do you and your firm become more productive? This comprehensive eBook will teach you how to do just that.

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Getting Organized: Five Essential Productivity Tips for Lawyers

If you want to boost your own productivity, the first thing you need to do is to get organized. That can seem overwhelming, especially if you're trying to juggle work and home life and seem to always have a million things to do. However, the good news is that you can take simple steps to get everything in order. Here's how:

Organize a master to-do list.
Once a week, ideally sometime between Friday afternoon and Sunday night, create a list of all the tasks that you need to complete the coming week. Then, once you have your initial list, take ten minutes each day to supplement or revise it. While some people may prefer the old-fashioned pen and paper approach to generating a to-do list, online solutions are extremely helpful. Good choices for task management include ToDoIst and the Google task function.

Schedule your day.
Taking tasks from your weekly to-do list, actually schedule your day each morning. (Yes, just like you did when you were a kid in school!) Preferably, block out 90-minute segments throughout the day—studies show that the brain stops functioning at peak performance when tasked for longer than that. You can also give yourself 10-15 minute breaks after each 90-minute segment. If an activity is going to take less than ninety minutes, schedule several tasks back-to-back within that time period.

Scheduling your day has several big advantages: First, you avoid wasting time between activities thinking about what comes next. Second, you give yourself the time and mental space to really focus on the task at hand. After all, whatever you're

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working on is what you're *supposed* to be doing at that moment since it's on the schedule. Third, you can visualize which tasks you will finish today and which ones will have to wait until tomorrow.

Include set times for checking email.
Schedule time to check your email and *don't check it before or after that*. An effective schedule for checking email looks something like this: Thirty minutes first thing in the morning (before you create your task list for the day), fifteen minutes before lunch, thirty minutes half-way through the afternoon, and fifteen minutes before the end of your day.

Categorize email responses.
If a particular email is going to take less than two minutes to respond to, do so immediately. If an email will take between five and ten minutes, either answer it during this email period or the next one. Anything over ten minutes needs to be flagged and added to your to-do list because it becomes an actual project.

Email services have "flagging" mechanisms such as labels, stars, and flags. The method you choose is not as important as the outcome: This basic step of inbox management is critical to remaining productive because you avoid getting sucked into the rabbit hole of responding to emails.

Turn off *all* notifications.
Between phones, tablets, and computers chiming, beeping, and ringing with notifications, we are constantly reminded that someone or something is demanding our attention. Unfortunately, we are conditioned to give near-immediate responses to everything and to feel guilty if we don't. However, the reality is very few things demand immediate responses. In fact, if someone wants or needs your attention now, chances are they will call you. Otherwise, nothing is so urgent that it can't wait 90 minutes.

Notifications really take your attention off the task at hand. In other words, your brain is registering new information while your attention is supposed to be in a different place. This creates an intellectual tug-o-war. Turning off all notifications eliminates such distractions.
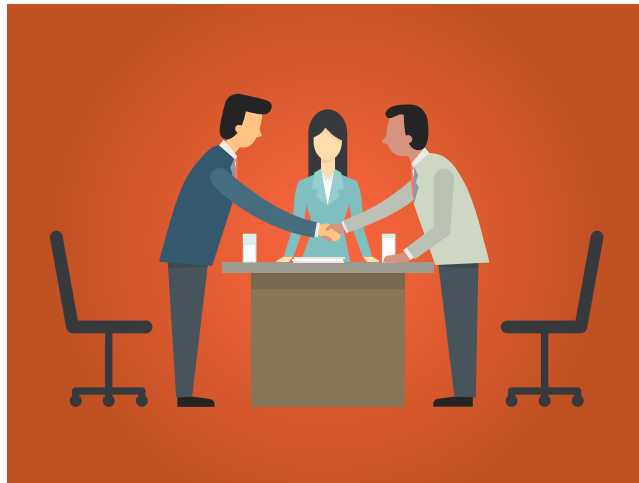
Productivity in Associates:
Setting Your Team Up for Success

Attorneys often come to the point in their practice when they ask themselves: Should I hire an associate? If you've never hired one, you're missing out on an opportunity to grow your firm. However, it's critical that you ensure you get the most out of the associates you hire and keep them productive. Here's how to do that:

Determine what you *really* need.
Before you start interviewing associates or setting benchmarks for your current ones, you need to set the standard for performance at your company. Ask yourself, "What am I really looking for?" Most entrepreneurial attorneys will look for someone who can not only increase the firm's billable hours but will also bring value to your clients and be an overall asset to the firm.

It's also helpful to think about the skills that you may be lacking, and what a good associate could do to make your firm more well-rounded. For example, if you're a great litigator but you hate going to mediations or negotiating settlements, then it might be a good decision to hire someone particularly skilled to do those tasks (and happy to do so!)

Most importantly, make sure that you're clear on your firm's purpose and the kind of company culture you're seeking to build. This will help weed out people who don't fit in with your vision.

Set clear expectations.
Associates should always know what's expected of them—whether it's the hours they should be in the office, if they're entitled to remote work, their target billable hours, or what the compensation plan is when they bring the firm new business. Making this up on the fly may seem attractive when you really need the help and want to hire someone right away, but having a structure in place serves everyone involved. Document everything!

Give them tools to stay productive.
Your associates should have an easy way to track all of their time, so use a good practice management software like [Rocket Matter](#) at your firm. Practice management software also cuts down on administrative time, so you and your associates can focus on practicing law and making the firm more money. Plus, the reports that you can generate through the software will give you a good idea of whether your associate is meeting your expectations in terms of productivity and profitability.

Spot the talent and reward it.
If your associate is solid at practicing law and also great at problem solving and working with people, then you have a potential rainmaker on your hands. Encouraging your associates to use their natural abilities to bring the firm new business—and incentivizing them monetarily to do so—will increase their job satisfaction and your firm's profits. Some firms that move associates into this type of role will align their bonus structures based on the volume of business, the amount of money the firm is able to collect from the business the associates generate, and how well the matter is supervised and delegated.

Have a regular review process.
It's one thing to just put a review on the books, but you need to determine what both parties hope to get out of the valuable time you spend doing them. Pull up reports that show your associates' utilization and realization rates. Show them these numbers overall, but also on a matter-by-matter basis. If your associates are doing a good job, encourage and reward them according to the compensation plan you set. If they're not performing as they should be, ask them what they think they could be doing better and what obstacles are in their way. Of course, then offer your own opinion on their work. It's helpful to chart the course forward by giving an associate goals to hit for their next review so they know what they're working toward.

How to Avoid the Productivity Pitfalls
in Associates

Picture this: You have a smart, driven, seemingly hardworking associate. However, at every review, he or she seems to be falling short on their billable hour target. The person is coming in early, working late, and even putting in time on weekends, but still can't seem to bill enough. If this is happening at your firm, you very likely have inefficiencies and roadblocks that are preventing your associate from succeeding. Here are the potential pitfalls...and what you can do to help:

Take a look at how things are delegated.
The first step to discovering whether delegation is the culprit for lack of productivity is to have your associate keep track of *all* her time. Many Rocket Matter users will create "non-billable" matters for each staff member to track the activities that they do that they can't bill clients for. From there, you'll see what kind of tasks should be delegated to support staff members whom you can pay at a lower rate. If there are tasks that are being delegated to support staff and coming back incorrect, poorly executed, or late, you may have identified that your associate's performance suffers because of those other ill-equipped or inefficient staff members. In other words, what appears to be your associate's inefficiencies might actually be your support staff's.

Look for bad billing habits.
Bad billing habits should be a thing of the past, but they certainly exist today. For instance, firms are still manually billing even though there are many powerful billing tools specifically for law firms, such as Rocket Matter, which allows users to leverage Bill-as-You-Work technology to easily track their time. Also, billing entries should not be delegated to another person! This can create a backlog at billing time.

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Consider a flexible work environment.
If you're restricting all work to the four walls of your office during specific times, you may be telling your associate when and where they should be productive. Instead, try letting them tell you when and how they work best. Going paperless will help with this, as a flexible workplace allows your employees to hit their target hours from anywhere, at the times that they're sharpest and most efficient. Plus, sometimes skipping the commute can mean putting in a few extra hours at work.

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Keeping Teams Productive Across the Web

You might have the perfect team in place, but that doesn't mean they're all in the same office. In fact, they might not even be in the same state—many firms have employees who work across the country and sometimes, internationally. Here's how to keep your team productive, not matter *where* they are:

Always know who's doing what.
The most wasteful failure point for teams is a lack of clarity about who is supposed to do which task. It is imperative for distributed teams to have a centralized place to assign tasks and maintain information about those assignments. This allows everyone to check on responsibilities, including their own.

There are a number of ways to do this. Law firms can use a case management platform such as Rocket Matter—the first and leading cloud-based practice management legal software—to keep track of tasks. Teams can also use more rudimentary platforms such as Google Keep or Evernote. The task descriptions should be short enough to not be overwhelming but detailed enough so that people don't misunderstand the assignment.

Use the right cloud-based tools.
One of the most frustrating aspects of being a distributed worker is when workers don't have access to the right resources such as documents, images, or other data. A solid cloud-based sharing platform is critical. There are several options, although the most common ones are Dropbox and Google Drive. For firms, document management can be subsumed into case management systems such as Rocket Matter.

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Saving resources in a centralized place is not enough. They also have to be organized and labeled in a consistent and descriptive matter. Team members should have a standard file naming system, which can be as simple as, "Date_Project_Title," or "Date_Matter_Title." What matters most is consistency. This reduces time lost searching for resources to perform the work that has to be done.

Make sure everyone knows the deadlines.
Not only do people have to know *what* they need to do, they also need to know by *when*. First, it is always imperative to set deadlines for work. Second, these deadlines have to be saved somewhere. A calendar is a very basic and effective way to do this. Whether this is a shared Google Calendar, Outlook, or Microsoft 365 doesn't matter. As long as deadlines are listed somewhere and team members can find them, this will ensure continued work flow.

Set up a system for accountability.
Team members have to be held accountable not only to their superiors but also to their peers. There are several ways to do this. For example, individuals can submit weekly or biweekly status reports. This allows everyone to see where there is a slow down or where goals are going to be missed. Noticing issues before they become emergencies or outright failures allows smooth management rather than having to get into a "putting out fires" mode. Status updates can also be provided at regular phone meetings or video conferences. The important thing is to keep communication flowing so that everyone can keep track of what is happening at all times.
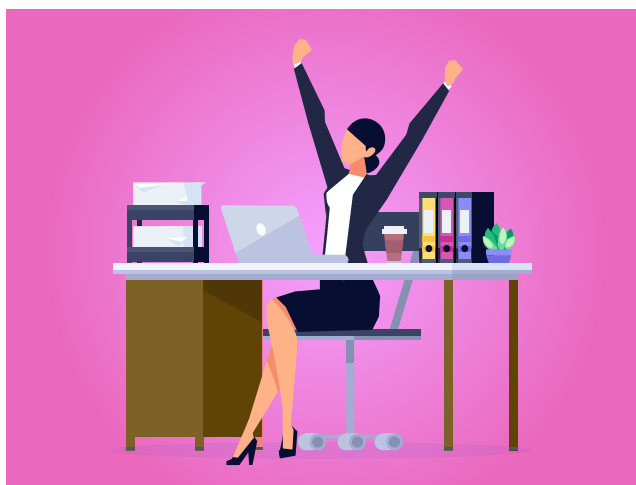
Women in Law: Making Sure Gender Bias Doesn't Harm Your Productivity

Productivity generally means generating something of value. However, productivity has to generate something of value for *you* such as accolades, recognition, or higher compensation. Performing tasks that benefit the firm but don't translate to professional advancement for you are, very simply, not productive. Unfortunately, such non-productive activities are very often delegated to women in law firms as a result of deep-seated biases regarding gender roles.

The key is to identify when such biases are at play and avoid them. Here's how:

Refuse to do 'office housework' and other secretarial tasks.
Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, and Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and a leading management thinker, noted in their article, ["Madam C.E.O., Get Me a Coffee,"](#) that "women do the lion's share of 'office housework'—administrative tasks that help but don't pay off." This includes taking notes at meetings, scheduling calls, and managing food and refreshments for events. So what should you do when asked to do such tasks? Learn to say "No." As noted by Sandberg and Grant, "These activities don't just use valuable time; they also cause women to miss opportunities. The person taking diligent notes in the meeting almost never makes the killer point." In other words, your valuable time should be used making intellectual contributions. If someone needs to take notes, that person can bring in a secretary or assistant to perform the task.

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Delegate home and personal logistics.
Books like Sandberg's *Lean In* illustrate how women's lives are overloaded with not only the normal pressures of building a career, but also with the mentally-draining tasks of home and childcare logistics. What's the solution? Hire an assistant. Services like Magic and Zirtual provide lost-cost personal assistants that will handle a variety of tasks, including finding childcare, coordinating doctor's appointments, setting up playdates (seriously!), coordinating with childcare providers, and reserving event locations. You can even use them to order and deliver dinners for when you're entertaining guests!

Avoid networking and mentoring events with low ROIs.
Women are expected to be "social" and "nurturing." This unfortunately means that female lawyers are often roped into mentoring others in ways that don't contribute directly to their own team or practice. They are expected to also entertain low-return business contacts and attend social functions that don't necessarily pay off. These are significant strains on female productivity.

Of course, mentoring, networking, and business development can be critical to professional development. The key is to avoid such tasks with low ROI. Before accepting an assignment, determine whether or not it will really enhance your productivity. If it won't, try to avoid doing it.

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About Rocket Matter

Rocket Matter helps law firms offer better client service and also increase revenues by more than 20%. The company was the first cloud-based legal practice management software on the market, landing its first client in 2007. It has been a leader ever since.

Rocket Matter has the most powerful, easy-to-use time and billing software in the industry. Also, when law firms want to make more money, go paperless, or increase confidence in their trust accounting, Rocket Matter helps them achieve those goals. With award-winning customer service based in the United States, it's no wonder thousands of law firms swear by Rocket Matter.

Enjoy this book and become part of our cutting edge community on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Also, check out our Legal Productivity blog.

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Nefra MacDonald

Nefra MacDonald is the Business Development and Strategic Partnership Coordinator at Rocket Mater. After working in various capacities at law firms, corporations, and nonprofits, she decided to use her experience to help address the pain points that practicing lawyers feel every day. Nefra currently co-chairs Rocket Matter's Product Advisory Committee, which serves as a source of targeted feedback for the company's product improvement strategy.