



## **POOP AND PINECONES**

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If I know my audience, right now about eighty percent of you are sporting a smile; wondering with a healthy mix of amusement and curiosity what I have in store for you with such an article title. The other twenty percent of you have a look of horror, disgust, or disdain. You're also wondering just what type of enlightenment I am preparing to convey, given such a repulsive title. Either way, I'm satisfied. I have your attention and know you will undoubtedly read on. And that's my goal, after all.

I recently presented the same seminar — *Time Management for Solo and Small Firm Attorneys* — back-to-back in two different counties. The concepts apply almost universally as well to mid-size and large firm attorneys. But the majority of attorneys who attend are representative of the overall demographics in PA; from solo and small firms. The title makes them feel more comfortable with the applicability of the material. But don't let that deter you from reading on if you're in a larger private firm or even a corporate or governmental office.

The seminar was created because my observation over the years is that most attorneys are lacking in good organization and time management skills. This was not as critical back "in the day" when I entered the legal industry. I remember when a "normal" day included far less hours of work and far less "information" coming in through various channels — mail, email, fax, printed materials, telephone — vying for our attention and response.

Today's reality is that there is always more work than hours available. Everyone seems to be working much harder, and yet we all seem to struggle more and more trying to catch up and keep up. So now it becomes critical to work smarter. Organizational and time management skills will help to separate the winners from the losers in this increasingly competitive and information-intensive market.

The core concepts of the seminar follow two paths. Each path serves to identify obstacles to organization and effective time management, and offer practical solutions.

First, one must perform a self-analysis to find out what factors are getting in the way of becoming organized. Toward that end, I identify the internal, external, and psychological factors which can impede organization and effective time management. As I proceed, I identify possible solutions to the various factors.

I don't identify every possible factor. Nor do I identify every possible solution. But enough factors are identified, with solutions offered, to assist the participant in thoroughly understanding the process, and recognizing its applicability to their daily productivity, or lack thereof. Then each attorney can conduct their own analysis privately, at times when introspection and observation at the workplace can offer revelations and stimulate the brain to seek out individualized solutions.

As a simple example, one factor which is pandemic is an interruption-rich environment. It's hard to get organized when you don't get more than a few minutes at a time to concentrate. Sound familiar? There are lots of potential solutions.

Client interruptions can be avoided by blocking calls during certain periods of the day, and returning calls in succession during other periods of the day. This simple strategy can yield great results when done consistently. Clients come to know that their calls will be answered reliably, and are therefore less insistent about interrupting except for true emergencies. Telephone tag is greatly reduced when clients know you will return calls within a certain window of time. They will usually make sure they are at their phone or that their assistant knows where to reach them during that window of time, so that your call is not missed.

Internal interruptions from your colleagues can be avoided by temporarily closing your door and putting your phone on do not disturb. Consider a note pinned to the outside of your door advising when you will be available. Most visitors to your door will leave a note, send an email, or come back. Again, only true emergencies will serve to interrupt.

Do your staff create a constant source of interruption? Are the questions frequent and repetitive? Keep in mind two things. One, staff will get you to think for them if you allow it. It takes a lot of responsibility and effort off their shoulders if they don't have to take any risk of thinking things through. To avoid this use the strategy of the One Minute Manager. Make it a requirement that an assistant doesn't come to you with a question without a suggested answer, or does not bring you a problem without a suggested solution.



They may initially be far off the mark. But over time, as they hear how you respond, they will come to identify the logical path you take, and follow it as well. As they get better at anticipating the correct answer or solution, they will build their confidence and think better on their own.

Two, staff interrupt because often attorneys are difficult to corner to ask a question or problem. You are often running hither and yon, often without advance warning, and as a result leave a staff person in the lurch, unable to complete an assignment until you return. As a result, all questions and problems begin to take on a sense of immediacy. You can eliminate much of the urgency factor if you schedule a regular time to confer with your staff each day. Perhaps you guarantee them the first fifteen minutes each morning, and again after lunch. (Of course barring unforeseen emergencies which must be rare or this strategy won't work.) You will find that, knowing they will get a predictable and reliable "audience" with you, they will make a list of questions and problems, and bring them to you at the designated meeting time, rather than interrupt you throughout the day, except for a true emergency.

You can also encourage your staff to use email or voicemail to communicate these questions and problems. Then you can respond before or after hours as time permits, after your critical time sensitive work winds down.

The second core concept covered in the seminar is that of a fundamental time management strategy which is highly successful: never touch anything more than once if possible. Each time you retouch something, you've wasted the time and effort that was previously expended. My mind visualizes this as a ballet or gymnastic performance — a beautiful display of efficiency with no wasted effort of motion.

A typical example of inefficiency is often found in the management of our email inbox. What I usually see of a typical attorney, is that the inbox receives between 40 to 150 emails per day. The attorney starts at the top, and reads each email one by one. Emails which are obviously junk or require no immediate action, based on preview or subject, are skipped or deleted. Email which require immediate action are handled efficiently.

However, those emails which require action at a later date are usually closed for the time being, as the attorney moves on, searching for everything which is more time sensitive. What happens each successive day? The attorney keeps "touching" these emails over and over. And keeps touching non-critical emails too, in an attempt to get to the important stuff.



Oh, you think, it's just a second or two at most before I move on. What's the big deal? Well, if you add up those miniscule amounts and multiply them by the number of times each day, and days each week, and weeks each year, you will be absolutely amazed how much time you are losing. We're not talking a few hours. We're talking weeks. At least that's what time management experts seem to agree upon. And I defer to their collective wisdom.

Let's add to that the mental distraction that those ticking time bombs in the inbox create. If you're typical, you have a tendency to fall behind in your emails. So more and more unread emails pile up on top of that one you left in the inbox which requires future action. Only suddenly you're waking up at 2:00 am with your mind racing, and you can't fall back asleep, because somewhere in your subconscious an alarm just sounded that one of those bombs is about to or may have just exploded. On a conscious level you probably can't even figure out why you are experiencing this unrest and increased anxiety. So now you lose sleep, you're tired and distracted the next day, and are probably even less organized and productive than usual.

What do you do? Well, if you're a Microsoft Outlook user, you simply "flag" the email with a follow-up date and time before closing it. The flag will automatically reopen the email at the appropriate date and time. No more unseen ticking time bombs. Or you can drag it to your tasks, and thereby create a more formal task which includes the entire text of the email, and offers not just one but up to three dates: due date, start date, and reminder date. For procrastinators the third date option can be a life saver. And even better, you can assign the task to someone else with just a few mouse clicks.

Another problem is that when we start going through the inbox sequentially, we typically pause on less critical items because they're of interest. (Anyone else spend time individually saving each picture of dogs in Halloween costumes this year? That darn email had 30+ cute pictures I could not pass on.) By the time you deal with those interesting but less critical items, you often arrive at something more critical, but then lack the time to deal with it effectively.

Let's take it a step further using simple Outlook tools. For those few cases or clients which must always get immediate attention, create an inbox sub-folder for each. As emails arrive from people connected to those cases, create a simple rule which will automatically route future emails from them to the folder. Add the folder to your "Outlook Today" screen.



Each day when you open Outlook you will immediately see the folders for those critical clients and matters, and will immediately see if anything new has arrived. You don't have to even touch your inbox until you have time, and yet you can immediately get to the critical communications. Now those interesting but non-critical emails don't even get a chance to distract you.

Well, you think, what about internal emails? They could be about any client. Or maybe about leftovers in the kitchen. How do you create a rule to deal with that? Simple. Ask them to put the client number or name in the subject line when writing about matters. Then create a rule based on text in the subject line. Works like a charm.

Of course, if you trump Outlook with case management, you can do all of this and more. This is but one example of using a readily available tool to help develop greater efficiency. Eliminating wasted effort one meaningful time increment after another. Sweet.

As I tell those in attendance, this is not about making massive change to the way you do things. It's about identifying a few tricks and tips which make sense to you, and which you can easily implement. Every simple change will make you more organized, and/or more time efficient. That is rewarding in and of itself. It will provide some relief, no matter how small. And that will encourage you to look further at what else you can do to make your life easier. One thing I know about you — each of you — is that no matter how uneasy you are with change, you are now time desperate enough to try simple changes in order to see whether they help. I guarantee they will. Remember, real progress is almost always about taking lots of small baby steps in the right direction, not about making giant leaps forward.

If I've not presented this easy one hour seminar in your county, ask your CLE director to schedule it. And if you don't know how to use your software tools effectively, consider taking one of my online webinars on Outlook or Word which are offered periodically by the PA Bar Institute. Earn MCLE credit from the comfort of your office *and* become more efficient . . . what a concept! Of course I can't cover the content of a full seminar in the span of a hot line call, but I can give you a few quick tips now and then.

Now let's get back to the title of this article. No doubt you're wondering if it even relates to the content. Actually, it does. You see, my husband, God bless him, is the poster child for disorganization and ineffective time management. I've been working hard to help suggest improvements that feel like his own solutions. For example, I live and work in a tri-level home.



The staircases between levels are high. So I make it a habit of putting everything which is to go from the main level to the upper level at the foot of the steps. And everything which is to go from the main level to the lower level at the top of those steps. And so forth. The trick is to never go up or down any level with empty arms. What could be more simple? No wasted motion. After more than a year, virtually none of this logical simplicity has “taken” and hubby continues to complain about all the trips up and down the steps he must make each day.

Taking it a step further — and returning to the article title — our “family” includes four lovable dogs. That’s a lot of poop to scoop each day. Our yard also contains some rather large pine trees. That’s a lot of pinecones to rake up or trip over. As I wander the yard with the dogs several times each day, bucket and long-handled scooper in hand, I spend my “down time” meandering, tossing the Frisbee for the Lab, admiring the gardens, and using the scooper to pick up pinecones as I come across them, and deposit them in the bucket. Not only do the pinecones help to keep the “fragrance” fresher, but I save considerable time and physical energy me or hubby would spend later going over the same area with a rake. Of course, I have yet to convince him to try this time saver either. A gentle suggestion when he complains of shoulder pain after an hour of raking has yet to serve its purpose. Yet, I admit I am seeing some progress. He increasingly laughs at my suggestions and quotes a line from one of our favorite TV programs, “Resistance is futile.” Recognition and acceptance, after all, is the necessary first step toward change. Be honest with yourself. You know you can make simple changes which will help. Stop resisting.

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