



ARE YOU A PROCRASTINATOR? HOW TO GET BACK TO WORK

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I admit that I am a procrastinator of the first order. If procrastination were a martial art, I would have earned my black belt long ago. If there is a task that I don't want to do, or I think will be very difficult to do, I am creative beyond imagination in finding endless other things to do other than the task at hand.

Procrastination is a common characteristic of highly motivated and intelligent people. I have seen procrastination at work in law firms for twenty years. In its simplest form it's harmless. For example, one particular managing partner rarely visited me in my office. On the rare occasion when he would show up in my office, he would sprawl out in a chair with his feet propped up on my desk and ask, "What's new?" I knew his secretary would be tracking him down shortly to get him back to work. He needed the break. I understood. And it always brought a sympathetic smile to my face.

At its most destructive, procrastination can lead to malpractice or alienation of the client. I remember a young associate who had to file a complicated brief. He spent weeks wandering the office, meandering in and out of offices talking to people. He spent lots of time on the phone on personal calls. He frequented the lunchroom to microwave popcorn. He chatted with support staff. In short, he did everything but start drafting the document. At the zero hour he worked around the clock in the library. But realizing that it was too late to do the brief, he spent the time frantically trying to find cause to enable him to delay the inevitable deadline. He came up with a limp argument which did not pass muster with the court. His procrastination would have resulted in a malpractice suit had the client been less gracious.

Yes, we all procrastinate on occasion. Some of us are worse than others. What you may not realize is that the act of procrastinating can cause additional stress, which is often actually greater than that of tackling the difficult task you are avoiding. And the last thing we need in our lives is additional stress. Law firm environments are stressful enough. Studies have proven that stress can have a negative impact on our health. The fact that our medical policies cost more and are more prohibitive than for many other industries bears that out. In addition,

Employee Assistance Plans (EAP's) experience a much higher utilization rate in the legal industry. No doubt about it — we've got more than our fair share of stress. And if there is a particularly stressful —difficult— task to do and you procrastinate, the additional stress can actually make it even LESS likely that you will begin the task at hand. It becomes a viscous cycle.

Here are some ideas I've read about and tried over the years which seem to work well. They don't all work at all times. But usually all you need is a kick start to overcome the procrastination blues. One of these ideas will likely give you the jolt you need.

What usually holds us back from starting a project is a perception of the presence of one or more of these factors:

1. the project is overwhelmingly complex
2. the project requires a great deal of time to complete
3. the project does not have a clear starting point
4. the project is unpleasant

Think about the last time you procrastinated. It's highly likely that one or more of these factors was evident. Let's deal with them one at a time.

Project Complexity really translates into a perceived lack of knowledge about the project. There is a fear that something important will be missed or handled incorrectly. The fear can be overcome through project mapping. That's a fancy way of saying that you should spend some time outlining the project into its various parts. Attorneys are particularly good at outlining. It seems to promote thought in a very organized, beneficial way, and reveals where there has been deficient thought and planning. In doing so, you can greatly simplify the project by providing clarity and organization. This will in turn provide confidence that you understand and have mastered the complexity that has been causing the procrastination.

Nowadays there is software which can assist the attorney in the outlining and/or thought/knowledge management process. Three products have gotten honorable mention in legal internet chat groups:

BrainForest <http://www.aportis.com/products/BrainForest/benefits.html>
ActionOutline <http://www.zdnet.com/swlib/lpad/actout.html>
NoteMap <http://www.casesoft.com>



Project Time, or the lack thereof, is frequently the culprit in law firm procrastination. Our lives are so crammed with deadlines and demands we can't imagine accomplishing something which requires a large block of time. As a result, we devote no time at all to the task. To overcome this factor, select small parts of the project to complete as time allows. Chip away at the project in 15–30 minute increments; one piece at a time, as time permits. There's no rule that the project needs to be completed in its entirety in one sitting, although we often get that idea into our heads. At some point, after a number of key parts of the project are completed, your perception of the remaining time demand will sufficiently change so as to no longer be cause for further procrastination.

Project Starting Point is sometimes not obvious on a lengthy or highly complex project. As a result, one is simply unable to get started, even if one is ready to do the work on the project and has the time available. This is a more subtle factor than lack of understanding or lack of time. Most of us believe that there is a clear beginning and end to each assignment. It is one of those logical thoughts which just makes sense. But when you can't clearly figure out where to start, and it is interfering with getting the project under way, you are best to start anywhere. As Washington D.C. consultant Margaret S. Spencer said in her "Overcoming Procrastination" article in Oregon's *In Sight*, "We lose sight of the fact that just starting anywhere is better than not starting at all." So pick a part, any part, of the project and get started. Eventually you will accomplish enough to figure out what might have gotten missed at the beginning, if anything, and you will get that done, too. Consider tackling what you believe to be the toughest part of the project first. The result is like removing the cork from the bottle – the rest of the project flows freely thereafter.

Project Unpleasantness is perhaps the hardest factor to overcome. We rarely if ever want to deal with unpleasant tasks. Who does? Who needs the additional stress? The longer one delays, however, the worse the unpleasantness can become. In order to get past this factor, negotiate with yourself to arrange a suitable reward for doing the work. For example, block out the morning to start or complete the task. Arrange to hold off calls and interruptions as you work. Follow up with a round of golf, or a massage or movie, etc. in the afternoon as your reward. In order to earn your afternoon reward, you must complete or make substantial progress on the project in the morning. Stick to the deal; no work, no reward.



Margaret Spencer suggests a unique approach I have not heard of before called “Drive Yourself Crazy By Doing Nothing”. She suggests that you assemble all the materials for the project on your desk, in an organized fashion, and then just sit looking at it and do absolutely nothing for exactly seven minutes. She states, “by the end of the seven minutes, you’ll be itching to start.” Of course, the simple fact that the project is already broken down into segments and organized can be cause enough to overcome procrastination. And seven minutes of doing absolutely nothing but stare at unfinished work can seem like a lifetime in a fast-paced law firm, and leave one eager to start on the work..

If you find that you frequently procrastinate, try to map out the project, start on it at any point, preferably the most challenging point, complete parts in small time increments, and if necessary make a deal with yourself to provide rewards for completion of substantial parts of the project. Don’t be determined to get it perfect from the start. A lawyer’s tendency to be a perfectionist can slow progress to a crawl. There’s time to correct and polish it up later as part of the overall review. The most important thing is to *just get started*.

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