

SHAKE Big Savings from Small Practice Management Ideas

By Reid F. Trautz

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“Great trees grow from the smallest shoots; a terraced garden, from a pile of earth, and a journey of a thousand miles begins by taking the initial step.”

For many lawyers, the daily press of billable client work and personal obligations makes it difficult for us to find time to improve our businesses. With all that we have to do just to keep up with current demands, there is precious little left for our families, our community, our businesses, or ourselves. As a result, many of us often push good management practices to the next page of our “To Do” list.

However, each of us must spend non-billable time improving our business or risk losing clients, frustrating productive staff members, turning off potential clients, burning ourselves out, and other similar outcomes. As business owners we need to invest time to improve our business practices, even with limited available time.

So when we do invest time in our business, we want it to have the biggest impact, to get the biggest bang for our non-billable buck. Surprisingly, the smallest change can often yield the biggest improvement.

So here are a few management ideas that, through a small investment of time, can have the biggest impact on clients, office productivity, firm profitability, and your quality of life.

Client Service

Few tasks rival client service in the bang-for-your-buck category. Small changes can yield instant and long-term rewards.

Walk through the front door of your firm as if you were walking in as a client for the first time. What do you see? What do you feel? Go step-by-step from the initial greeting through the end of the appointment. Are you satisfied with what you see, hear, and feel? What changes can be made to improve the client's experience? Draw up a list of improvements to make over the next few weeks or months.

Create an online client satisfaction survey using one of the free or low-cost services such as Survey Monkey.com or Zoomerang.com. When you send your end-of-the-case thank you/disengagement letter to your clients, ask them to complete the online survey to better help you to serve them in the future.

Thoroughly review and revise your fee agreement. A good fee agreement is the foundation of a positive attorney-client relationship, yet many versions I have seen wouldn't meet ethical standards or withstand scrutiny in a fee dispute. So take time to walk through each provision. Remove the legal jargon, personalize the language (rather than using the terms “client” or “party of the first part”), and make it balanced so it doesn't seem so one-sided to the client. Read your jurisdiction's ethics rules and craft your agreement to meet or exceed these standards.

Financial Management

Review financial reports available from your time and billing software: Almost all billing software can run productivity and financial reports to provide a snapshot of how your firm is performing. Don't just rely on total hours or fees billed; each month spend 30 minutes looking at your accounts receivable, work-in-progress, timekeeper, and realization reports. You will learn more about the financial health of your firm each month than you ever thought possible.

Read your state's rules of professional conduct and sync your trust account procedures to them. Often, even experienced lawyers (or their bookkeepers) are not properly following good trust accounting practices. Clearly, bad trust account management can have the biggest impact on you and your clients, so do not neglect this aspect of practice.

Make your bills clear and informative, with a format and layout that is easy to read. Ask several clients, your spouse, or other non-lawyers to review several samples of your bills—with names and addresses redacted, of course! Is the wording free of jargon? Do they understand what work was performed? Can they understand how the amount of the bill was calculated? Does the bill reflect the value received? If so, you probably have a winning format that your clients will respect and pay.

Marketing

Whether you are a sole practitioner or a partner or associate in a small firm, you need to have a clear sense of your role in marketing. In today's environment, everyone must be part of the marketing efforts to some degree. Make sure each member of your firm has a clear understanding of their roles and the tools and resources to do this important aspect of their jobs.

Have a marketing plan. Keep it simple, and make it measurable. Use it to avoid a shotgun approach, which is the biggest waste of time and money. Do some simple market research, then act: What do I want my practice to look like? Where do my best clients come from? What is my most profitable type of client or work? Where can I find more of the work I want?

Try four-for-one marketing: Create and present a seminar for your state, local, or national bar association, or a non-legal business group. Obtain a business card from all attendees and follow up with a note or e-mail. Take the written CLE materials and edit them into one or two smaller articles. Submit your articles for publication to state bar magazines, business journals, and national publications pertaining to the legal profession or those read by your target market. When published, send reprints out to clients and other interested contacts.

Add client testimonials to your website—if allowed by your state ethics rules and opinions. Ask several of your best clients to write a testimonial so you can add it. Also consider recording their statement and adding the video to your website instead of text.

Technology

Get training on the one piece of software you use the most. If that is MS Word, then go online to take a class or hire a trainer to come in for half a day to train everyone in your office. Next, schedule training on the software you need the most but don't use enough.

Purchase inexpensive add-on software to get the most out of programs you regularly use. RoboForm and Anagram are two of the best computer utilities to save time and make you more productive. RoboForm (www.robiform.com) is an add-on to Internet Explorer and Firefox that helps generate and securely remember all of your online passwords and makes online form completion much easier. Anagram (www.getanagram.com) is an add-on to Outlook that will quickly capture signature blocks on e-mails or Word documents and add the information into your Outlook Contacts in just a few seconds. Both products are available for less than \$40 each.

Schedule a few hours to review collaboration technologies. The web is now home to numerous new inexpensive ways to communicate and collaborate with clients, potential clients, co-counsel, expert witnesses, or anyone else with whom you need to work effectively. Check out new offerings from Adobe, Zoho, Google Docs, Skype, GoToMeeting, or use your favorite search engine to do a search on “collaboration technologies for lawyers.”

Office Systems and Processes

Review and analyze your calendar and docketing system to make sure it is bulletproof. According to the *Profile of Legal Malpractice Claims 2004-07* (published by the ABA Standing Committee on Lawyers' Professional Liability), calendaring errors still account for a significant portion of malpractice claims, especially in solo practices and small firms.

Make sure your backup system actually works. Of course, you already have an automatic computer backup system to copy all of your important documents and information on your firm computers. (You do, don't you?!) But how do you know you can actually retrieve a copy of what you need, if you need it? Authorize or perform a “test restore” of one or more files on your computer backup system. Better to be safe than sorry.

Find your most productive time of the day. It will vary for each of us. For me, it is almost always 10:00 AM to noon. Guard this time. Unless you are needed in court or for a client meeting, use it to do your most important work for the day; do not allow interruptions, if at all possible.

If you are drowning in e-mail, as so many lawyers are today, check out the Inbox Zero strategies at 43Folders.com, a helpful blog focusing on productivity. Just a few minutes of education can help you cut hours off of your e-mail activities.

Give your office a quick stress-reducing makeover. Poor lighting can cause eyestrain and contribute to fatigue. Another source of stress is tension and pain caused by office chairs with poor support. An improperly positioned computer monitor and keyboard can strain neck, eyes, and hands. Noisy offices can inhibit concentration and add to frustration. Changing any or all of these can make for happier, healthier, and more productive staff.