Book Review: Time Management

*So Little Time, So Much Paper* by Meg Spencer. Produced by ABA-CLE and the Law Practice Management Section, 2000.¹

Are you a legal administrator with time on your hands? Are you so well organized that you check everything off your “to do” list each day; you have complete control over your firm’s strategic plan; you have a place for everything and everything in its place; and you have time for yourself and your family? Then stop reading now. This book review covers a subject that is the bane of existence of many of us — legal administrators, associates, partners, paralegals, staff, mothers and fathers who don’t work outside of their homes, and those who do — managing our time.

For many of us, our days in the office can quickly become out of control: a secretary calls in sick in the middle of a trial; a paralegal quits to move to another firm; a natural disaster disrupts the entire firm. Where do you start to get a handle on your daily life so that you can be prepared for the big issues? *So Little Time, So Much Paper* offers a step-by-step approach to getting organized. While there are a number of time management resources on the market, Spencer’s strength comes from her own experience as a law firm associate, one of many new lawyers who worked long hours and weekends to try to stay abreast of assignments.

Because of her understanding of the reality of law firm life, Spencer presents some of the time-honored management tools as they relate to legal practice. First and foremost, Spencer reminds us to set our own personal goals — including those that apply to our work, and, perhaps more importantly, those that apply to our life. There’s a tired expression that says that nobody lies on her deathbed lamenting that she should have spent more time in the office. Spencer makes you look at where you are going, and think about why you want to go there, even inside the pressurized and competitive atmosphere of a busy firm, among associates who are almost exclusively focused on surviving, getting ahead, and getting the really good assignments.

But Spencer goes well beyond the generalizations of setting goals and staying focused. She presents detailed information about how to take those goals and use them as a blueprint for organizing your time and your physical space. Spencer offers concrete steps to prepare your month, then your week, then your day. She has specific tips for keeping your desk clutter-free, for dealing with interruptions and managing telephone and e-mail messages. She even suggests how much time to spend on goal and priority setting. The book includes a workbook of sample forms and exercises to help you plan your work.

Spencer knows that you cannot prevent disasters. All you can do is prepare yourself to handle them — by managing your time to handle daily tasks and staying focused on the firm’s — and your own — goals. Her guiding principle is that we must make time to plan.

¹ Permission is granted to reprint *So Little Time, So Much Paper* contributed by Rosemary Shiels as it appears in January/February 2004, Volume 23 Issue 1 of Legal Management magazine.
This is a resource for the entire firm and to sweeten the attraction, 2.75 hours of MCLE credit in 60-minute states and 3.30 hours of credit in 50-minute states have been requested in states accrediting in-house programming and self-study. Your partners and associates can learn a useful tool and receive MCLE credit at the same time. Because this book consists of three audiotapes or one CD-ROM, you, your staff and attorneys can listen to the book during the commute to and from work — and listen more than once to let the full impact of the system take effect.

If there is any fault in this book, it is its comprehensiveness. Spencer provides so much detail in managing projects, priorities and time, the information can seem overwhelming. As an example, Spencer presents an elaborate set of steps called “The To-Do List Pyramid: The Master Planning List, the Weekly Plan and the Daily Plan.” She urges the reader to use a system of symbols to indicate whether each task was completed, partially done, dropped, missed, carried forward or delegated. Each task should be updated with one or more of the symbols each day. Spencer also urges readers to create a “Master Notebook” with the master planning list, the calendar for the coming year or two, telephone directory and file indexes for cases and projects.

Any “fault” of this book could be ascribed to this reader who might not be ready to embrace the full time management system. Nevertheless, a book like this, designed to help the reader make things better, is a success when even one or two strategies make sense and can be used immediately. The power of this book is that the author presents the full range of time-management techniques — those that can provide some relief in a very busy life to those that can be fully implemented to make a real change in how to arrange things in your work that will reap tremendous benefits.

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