

When Procrastination Rears Its Ugly Head

by Dan Crystal

Procrastination and lawyering seem to go hand in hand. Legal work is intricate and precise, and legal concepts are hard to communicate to most people. This can leave you feeling alone with your burden. There are so many elements of lawyering, such as being organized, using time efficiently, being a productive writer, and being financially savvy, that may not be related to why you became a lawyer in the first place. You are likely to think, "I didn't think it would be this way." You may feel abused by your long hours in the office, thinking about other things you would like to do. If you don't attack these foreign skill-sets head-on, it can generate an avoidant relationship with your work where you put off important responsibilities.

Procrastination can be draining, leading to inefficiency and causing you to wonder why work is taking so long. At its most pernicious, you may experience an inability to concentrate or organize your thoughts. I definitely had my share of nights like this writing my dissertation. This can lead to panic about everything you have to do. But keep in mind that procrastination is the mind's striving for health. It is a coping strategy when work becomes intolerable. In this article, I will offer ways of tapping your self-confidence to combat procrastination, as well as practical suggestions like using your schedule and workspace more effectively.

Why Do I Procrastinate?

Procrastination is an avoidance behavior, so it's not surprising that the reasons a person procrastinates are often not conscious. I have worked in therapy with lawyers hooked on Hulu.com, Facebook, and news sites, rather than writing the brief with the upcoming deadline. I also have clients with piles of old, unresolved cases who live in dread of confronting these matters. Since the reasons for procrastination will differ depending on the lawyer, the first step is to stop and ask, "Why do I procrastinate?" Since the impulse to stop working can be sudden, the answers will not always be clear. In this case, it is important to ask yourself, in that split second before leaving your computer to satisfy your chocolate craving, "What am I thinking?" Take a second to answer these questions. This is

the starting point.

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I Can't Do This!

The automatic thought that led you to flee your work often has something to do with self-confidence. The words may be something along the line of "I can't do this." The trick is to be able to hear this thought, acknowledge it, and come up with a practical solution. Affirming self-statements make a difference here. Use a mantra that reminds you of your abilities. If you've thought about your mission statement as a lawyer, this is when to use it. The idea is to gently encourage yourself. Steve Pavlina, a motivational author, discusses replacing the words "I have to do this" with "I want to do this (if only to have it done)." That way, you don't feel bullied by your work, and can feel autonomous. Your office should be dotted with visual reminders of your previous successes and abilities. I remind my clients to "keep your trophies close." These are places to turn in inevitable moments of doubt.

Perfectionist? Use Your Schedule.

Many procrastinators are perfectionists who expect to hatch ideas from their minds all at once and perfectly formed. That is a lot of pressure to place on oneself. This is especially true of lawyers just starting out, who place the law on a pedestal and see themselves as an ant crawling up the side. Over time, you will learn to evaluate your effort less by your precision-crafted legalese and more by the outcome of your work. According to Pavlina, a way for perfectionists to take the pressure off is to replace the words "finish it" with "begin it." Work with a matter in small, bite-sized chunks.

You might expect successful lawyers to create challenging goals for themselves, but the opposite has been shown to be true. Peak performers generally set easier goals than

most people. That way, they can experience a continuous sense of efficacy. Set small, realizable goals, followed by a reward. The trick with procrastination is to use the time away from one's work to be rejuvenated and not avoidant of responsibilities. Successful people generally use their schedule not just for all of their onerous responsibilities, but also for things to look forward to. These plans can help make your hard work feel worthwhile. A good meal, tickets to a show or concert, a massage — you name it.

Bringing Sanctity to Your Workspace

Procrastination is, in fact, an act of prioritization. You are prioritizing your cognitive freedom (whether it involves navel-gazing or sudoku) over your work. This sometimes happens when you are burdened by so many responsibilities that a step in any given direction leads you to feel like you are neglecting several other matters. Cleaning rituals before periods of productivity can serve as a healthy pep rally, and can help sharpen your focus. Your desk can be seen as a metaphor for your mind. If your office space is cluttered with several disorganized matters, it is likely to be mirrored with several ideas competing for airspace in your mind (and vice versa). Cleanup can be a gentle, somewhat mindless ritual of moving papers around. This can help refine your focus to a single point — the matter you need to work on now. Having a system whereby you are sure that matters will be attended to can prevent the deepest form of anxiety: not knowing what you may be forgetting.

You may avoid starting a matter because the effort required to find the necessary papers, reboot your slow computer, and return several non-urgent calls is distracting. The answer is to keep your office well-oiled, with several staging areas, so that you know that each area of work has room to breathe and is living in the right corner of your small town. Then, be sure to shut off the phone and flip the Do Not Disturb sign. There are many areas in life where multi-tasking is a wonderful skill, but writing briefs is not one of them. ◊

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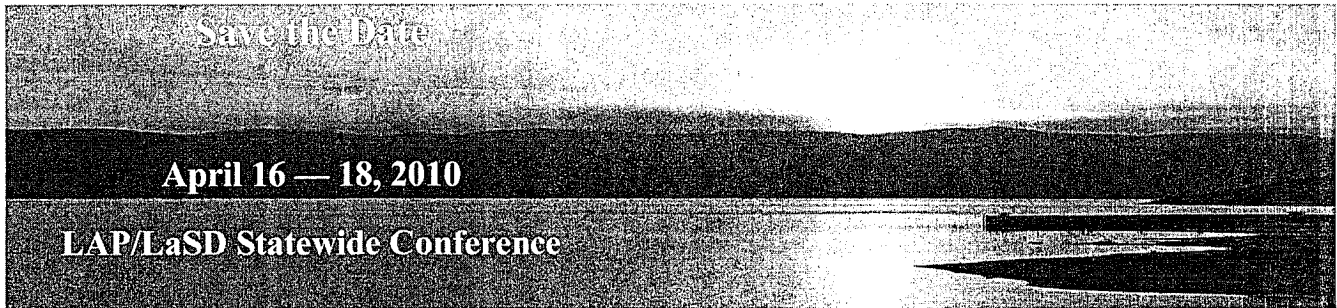
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Once Processing, Always Processing

E-mail is simply a form of correspondence. Treat it as such. Until you realign your thinking to view it this way, it will be difficult to effectively and efficiently manage it. However, once you adopt that perspective, the processing of e-mail and its brethren becomes much easier.

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individualized coaching. You can learn more about Paul and his practice at www.quietspacing.com.



Busting Procrastination-By-Computer

- Dan Crystal, Psy.D.

A computer seems to have two competing purposes: a mind organizer and a mind eraser. The tool we use to refine our thoughts in precision-crafted legalese is married to the ultimate implement of distraction: the Internet. There are few things as mindless in life as surfing the Internet. It's a semi-passive act. While we do the clicking, the choices of action are fairly narrow with highlighted keywords, pictures, or video serving as our options. It's a dissociative experience where most people report "losing track of time" along the way. I've worked in treatment with lawyers who have frittered away hours following the stock market, reading up on gossip, watching TV on hulu.com, or chatting on Facebook as opposed to doing their work. No one's talking about how much fun it is.

There are no perfect solutions to this inconvenient pairing. Getting your work

done requires being able to write briefs on Microsoft Word or to use Outlook to check your schedule and email. At the same time, the Internet has become the means by which we learn about things, buy plane tickets, pay our bills, make plans with friends, get directions, and so on.

Here are a few tips for exerting control over your Internet forays:

- Use an egg timer! This way you are held accountable for the time spent on online distractions.
- Make a list of the things you need to research online and only go to those sites.
- Wait until you get home before you forage in the world of Internet mindlessness.

- Print out web pages you want to read rather than spending more time than necessary behind a computer.

It's natural for all of us to need breaks from hard work. The trick with procrastination is to feel rejuvenated by the time we spend away from our work as opposed to feeling avoidant of our responsibilities. Try to recognize if taking a walk around the block, meeting a friend for lunch, or taking a few minutes out to meditate in a local park will serve you better than the latest updates on the Huffington Post or playing solitaire. Remember: You Do Have a Choice!

