

Practical Success

Cordell M. Parvin

Some Practical Thoughts On Conquering Career Burnout

I have known several lawyers who started their careers loving being a lawyer but after only a few years decided they hated practicing law. I wrote about a lawyer who was burning out in my book: *Say Ciao to Chow Mein*. If you are one of those lawyers who feel that they are spending all of their time at the office getting billable work done, take note: You will continue down this path until you start focusing on priorities.

I remember a lawyer in my office describing to me her typical day. She said she had gotten up at about 7:00 a.m., showered and had gotten ready for work. She arrived at the office just before 9:00 a.m. and had done billable work until noon. She had gone downstairs and brought something back and ate lunch at her desk. She worked on the same client matter all afternoon and had finally left the office at 6:30 p.m., having recorded 8.75 billable hours that day.

When she got home she fixed dinner, put her two children to bed, and then remembered she needed to pay her family bills. She spent the next hour taking care of that. She went to bed at about 10:30 p.m. both exhausted and unfulfilled.

I asked the associate to describe her most important roles in life. As expected, she said being a mother came first, a wife second, and her career

third. I knew that health and fitness had always been important, so I mentioned that role. I also knew she was active in her church, as well as the Rotary and their community service projects, so I mentioned those roles.

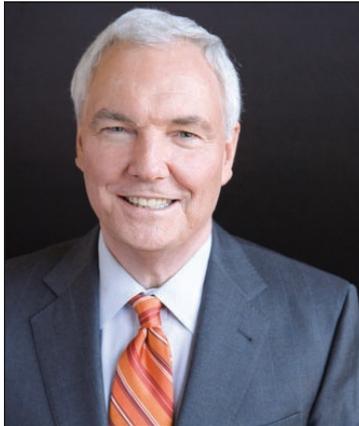
What Are Your Roles?

Many lawyers who feel they are burning out believe that the demand for too many billable hours is the heart of the problem. In most cases I disagree. I see lawyers burning out because they have not taken control of their lives, have not defined what is important to them, and are not using their non-billable time or personal time wisely. They have an unspoken plan each week for their billable work each day, but no plan for the other aspects of life.

I knew the lawyer I mentioned above used to run and work out. In fact, she had run in marathons and half-marathons. I also knew that one of her colleagues who also had two children alternated running days with her husband. While the attorney at my office thought she was too exhausted to exercise, I thought her lack of exercise contributed to her exhaustion. Lawyers need to do something physical to avoid being exhausted from sitting in front of a computer all day.

Are You Getting Regular Exercise?

When my daughter Jill was born, my wife Nancy was a medical technologist and worked some



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crazy hours at the hospital. The weekends Nancy was at home, I frequently worked on my non-billable client development efforts in my office from 6:00 a.m to 9:00 a.m on Saturday and Sunday. I chose to do that because Jill and Nancy liked to say that they eased into their day. Working during those hours allowed me to be home early and eat dinner most weeknight evenings with Nancy and Jill.

A single mom I coached a few years ago worked on articles and presentations at the kitchen table while her 10-year-old son did his homework. A lawyer I coached whose wife was a resident physician worked on articles and presentations after he put his children to sleep each night.

What Are Best Times For You To Do Non-Billable Client Development Work?

In the book *First Things First* by Dr. Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill, and Rebecca Merrill, Dr. Covey writes about the “big rocks.” When he was teaching, he pulled out a wide-mouth gallon jar and placed it next to a pile of fist-sized rocks. After filling the jar to the top with rocks, he asked, “Is the jar full?” The group replied, “Yes.” He then got some gravel from under the table and added it to the jar. He jiggled the jar until the gravel filled the spaces between the rocks. Again, he asked, “Is

the jar full?” This time, the group replied, “Probably not.” Dr. Covey then added some sand and asked, “Is the jar full?” “No!” shouted the students. Finally, Dr. Covey filled the jar to the brim with water and asked his students the point of this illustration. Someone replied that you could always fit more things into your life if “you really work at it.” “No,” countered Dr. Covey. The point is, if you don’t put the big rocks in first, “...would you ever have gotten any of them in?”

Other Than Billable Work, What Big Rocks Are You Putting In The Jar?

One final piece of advice: If you have been focused on getting your hours to the exclusion of other things, change will not come easily. Do not treat focusing on your priorities like a diet, just to start it and then abandon it. To be successful, make it a lifestyle change. Prepare goals and a plan for each week around your roles. Treat the other important priorities in your life as you do the priority of doing your billable work. Do not fall off the wagon the first time something derails you. As one lawyer I coach said to me after missing a function at her children’s school: “I guess I won’t win the ‘Mom of the Year Award’ so I will try for ‘Best All Around.’”

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