



5 Efficiencies to Boost Your Firm's Productivity

by Jared Correia



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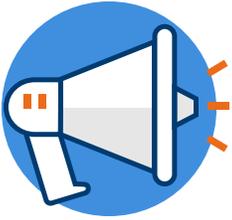


Achieve a more efficient practice

Business management training has never been a staple of the lawyer's education, whether in law school or as part of an informal professional development curriculum. As a result, the vast majority of attorneys haven't learned how to manage a business—which isn't their fault, of course. And because of demanding schedules and case work, many attorneys presented with those hurdles don't often attempt to leap them or attain business management skills. More often than not, they throw up their hands and give up.

The good news is, lawyers can become better business managers, though it won't happen overnight. Determining the best method for managing a law office is an ongoing process, including after you've picked up the basics, as well as some things beyond the basics. The first thing to do is to spot major issues, and try to solve no more than five of them at any one time. One species of law firm problem relates to inefficiencies in process. For the most part, law firms just do what they do, what they've always done; but, they don't have a *plan* for doing what they do. So, if you can figure out where your law firm is inefficient and come up with concrete solutions to turn those inefficiencies toward efficiencies, you'll be well ahead of the curve, and the results will show up on your bottom line.

So, let's go through five common law firm inefficiencies to help you identify, and potentially get started on reversing them.



Communication

Lawyers are often reluctant to communicate with their clients, in part because they believe that their clients don't want to hear from them. If you can get past that psychological barrier, the results you will get from ramping up your client communications will make the reward obvious. But, realizing that you should talk to your clients more, rather than less, is not an additional efficiency in its own right. In point of fact, it represents more that you have to do, and so could become an inefficiency if you're not organizing your efforts effectively.

When you decide to more regularly update and communicate with your clients, the next step is to build out systems for doing so. The good news is it's pretty easy to do that nowadays. The simplest way to make sure that you and your staff stay in better contact with your clients is to create workflows for that purpose. Workflows are just a fancy way to describe groups, or aggregations, of tasks. For every case type you work on, there are likely 5-10 things you do the same way each time. Rather than creating those tasks one-by-one, workflows allow you to build the whole list, and then attach the right lists to the appropriate files.



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When you're building out case tasks in the first instance and constructing a set of administrative responsibilities for you and your staff, realize that you can attach client notification attributes to each of those tasks on your list. So, if you send a document to the court, you can inform your client of that and send a copy of the document to your client via a secure, encrypted client portal (available through the majority of case management systems). Of course, that's only one example. Anytime you take a case-related action, you can either automatically notify your client, ask your staff to do so, or remind yourself to do it.

Thursday
24

Client Briefing
11:00 AM – 12:00 PM
Conference Room A

Schedule your client communications to save time and headspace for more pressing concerns.

As impersonal as it sounds, systems reduce thinking. If you schedule the majority of your client communications, you don't have to wonder whether and when you should contact your clients, saving time, and your headspace, for more pressing concerns. The advantage of creating excuses to contact your clients more often than you now do is that you don't know what you don't know. Conversations with clients may yield information that your clients would not have otherwise so openly shared with you—information that could be vital to their cases. Also, if you establish a pattern of frequent communications, as well as the notion of an open line of communications, it will encourage clients to reach out to you without having to be prompted to do so. And, not for nothing, but clients you don't talk to are more likely to report you for ethics violations and less likely to recommend you to friends.

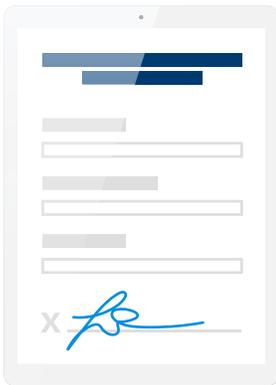
While talking with clients may seem like the most inefficient thing a lawyer can do, the value of those conversations is almost incalculable—especially when they can be managed within the construct of an efficiency system.





Document management

Lawyers traffic in documents—even now, as law firms move to paperless office models, documents remain the primary tool for practicing law, even if they have mostly become electronic. While many law firms view the conversion to paperless systems as a challenge, the correct view is in line with the opportunity presented.



The use of electronic forms and documents presents law firms with a massive speed advantage.

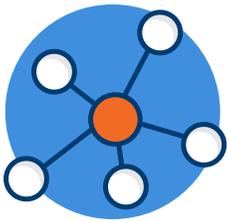
The use of electronic forms and documents presents law firms with a heretofore unfathomable speed advantage. At a basic level, it is far easier to draft documents in electronic format than to handwrite things or to use typewriters. But, you already knew that.

The thing that lawyers don't often realize is there are better ways to manage templates than simple find-and-replace functionalities in Microsoft Word, or maybe even WordPerfect. Modern document automation tools pull in data from relevant sources to define the correct client information and can feature Q&A-style processes, by which the system asks for responses from the user in order to correctly design documents and add or remove clauses based on predefined logic.

In addition to this being a highly valuable learning tool for staff and associates, using a document automation system adds massive speed upgrades to law firm document production—no matter who's doing it. Think about what that means for your law practice. If you run an estate planning firm and can cut down the time it takes for you to design a basic package from five hours to one hour, you've just made yourself a whole heck of a lot more money. You're not, in that instance, going to reduce your rate by 80 percent; but, if you leave it where it was, you can now make five times as much as you did before. This is probably the most naked example of how a single efficiency upgrade—the purchase of document automation software—can multiply your revenue.

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Keep in mind that document automation software also offers useful document management features, like deep search tools and version control, that will add to your efficiency and revenue, as well.



Staff management

Law firms can have difficulties managing staff on at least three broad levels. At times, lawyers paint these as “staff problems” but in reality, they are management problems, capable of solution. As leaders of their practice, managing attorneys might naturally feel inclined to take ownership of all the work involved with running their business—from the necessary, day-to-day administrative tasks, to the demanding client work. This can be overwhelming and may result in attorneys asking themselves if handling every single task is the best use of their time. If you suspect you might fall into this category, the remedy is to sit down and define every task you perform. Then, split those up into three categories: administrative, substantive that can be handled by someone else, and substantive that can be handled by you alone. Keep the last of those, and delegate the others.

Daily Tasks

→ administrative

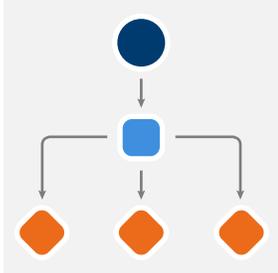
→ substantive
handled by others

✓ substantive
handled by you

Delegate administrative and substantive tasks that can be handled by someone else.

Of course, identifying and assigning tasks is one thing; making sure those assigned tasks get done is another matter entirely. And, the solution is not to stay on top of your employees like a discomfiting blanket. No one likes a micromanager, law firm staff included. So, micromanage from afar. As previously alluded to, creating workflows is essential to case progress. Each task in a workflow will likely have an assigned performer and a due date. Managing attorneys can track the progress of tasks on each case electronically, and will only need to step in when a task becomes overdue.

Heavy workloads and other demands don't always allow law firms to effectively train staff: both attorneys and non-attorneys. Often, the law firm training manual resorts to more of a single statement: “here's your new desk, now get to work.” Of course, that's not especially helpful; even if you're hiring someone with substantive experience, that person must still be made to understand the internal workings of your own peculiar law firm. The key to law firm training is that you only train once.



Develop a training protocol to ensure you have an effective manual in place.

Develop a training protocol for a job type. Train your new person. Then, after that employee is comfortable in their role, have them design technology-ready workflows, centered on their job functions. Then, ask them to create a manual explaining how his or her position works. When you next hire, you'll have an effective manual in place, as well as an outgoing employee to train their replacement.





Payment processing

Try going into Target and writing a check for a purchase. If everyone in line is not rolling their eyes at you, then the cashier might be. So, you use a debit or a credit card instead. Why, then, do you still ask your clients to pay your law firm by check?

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Expectations of businesses are shifting. Like it or not, all businesses are now being held to the higher customer experience standard that leading companies like Amazon are setting. TSYS found 65 percent of people expect to be able to pay with a credit or debit card from a biller's app or mobile website, and 79 percent expect service providers like you to offer the same payment options as large national companies. Offering clients the opportunity to pay online with a credit or debit card is a big opportunity to clean up and streamline your processes and represent yourself as a technologically savvy, efficient, and modern attorney.

Clients don't expect you to be wrestling with stacks of paper and crunching numbers on a retro calculator. They expect you to use the latest tools, processes, and technology available to you to handle their legal issues adeptly and efficiently. Furthermore, if you're only offering traditional payment options like cash and check, your clients might wonder whether you've kept up with the latest legal developments and processes, as well. These days, running an office that isn't up-to-date doesn't instill confidence.

You want to be seen as modern, technologically competent, and easy to work with. Modern online payment tools are one key aspect of that, allowing you to show clients and prospects that you're not afraid of the innovations brought by the Digital Revolution—you've embraced them.

Invoice Payment →

\$


AMERICAN EXPRESS


mastercard



PAY ATTORNEY

Represent yourself as a modern attorney by giving clients the option to pay online with a credit or debit card.



Collections

Ah, collections. Since the majority of attorneys still get paid by the hour, after they complete the work they've promised, accounts receivable are a fact of life. And, even if you endeavor to get paid in advance, or via recurring retainers, as much as you can, that may not entirely eliminate accounts receivable from your life. So, if you still have to collect unpaid fees from your clients, creating a system around your procedures will make you more efficient in what you do, and also allow you to collect more, meaning you'll make more money over time.

This all starts with your fee agreement. Include provisions related to collections in that document, and explain those to your clients. How does the fee structure in the particular case operate? What are the law firm's payment options, and how are they accessed? When and at what rate are penalties assigned for late payment?

When you align everything in your fee agreement, you then have a process to follow should you need to make collections; and, by explaining everything you do in this realm to your clients in advance, you'll increase the likelihood of getting paid in the first place. And, as with any other administrative process, you will ask your staff to design administrative workflows related to collections, which you can then monitor.

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Creating efficiencies within your law practice is all about getting started. Just as the inertia of inefficiency may have carried your firm to its current state, the efficiencies you add now will build effective habits that will save you time and make you more money into the future.

To get started with a sample fee agreement you can begin using in your law firm now, download this customizable version from LawPay.



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About LawPay

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From the minute you sign up, our knowledgeable support team works to ensure your success. Our technology exceeds PCI Data Security Standards, which means your sensitive data is completely protected. We're an approved member benefit of 47 state bars, trusted by more than 50,000 law firms, and we're the only payment solution offered through the ABA Advantage program.

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About Jared Correia

Jared D. Correia, Esq. is the CEO of Red Cave Law Firm Consulting, which offers subscription-based law firm business management consulting and technology services for solo and small law firms. Red Cave also works with legal institutions and legal-facing corporations to develop programming and content. A former practicing attorney, Jared has been advising lawyers and law firms for over a decade. He is a regular presenter at local, regional and national events, including ABA TECHSHOW. He regularly contributes to legal publications, including his column, 'Managing,' for Attorney at Work, and his 'Law Practice Confidential' advice column for Lawyerist. Jared is the author of the American Bar Association publication 'Twitter in One Hour for Lawyers'. He is the host of the Legal Toolkit podcast on Legal Talk Network. Jared also teaches for Concord Law School, Suffolk University Law School and Solo Practice University. He loves James Taylor, but respects Ron Swanson; and, he tries to sneak Rolos when no one is looking.