



Taking Care of Yourself

By Robert A. Creo



Previous columns have addressed the lawyer's identity and reputation and the exploration of self-awareness, professional enhancement and development. This column explores best practices for achieving maximum productivity with minimum stress.

Stress, Pacing and Flow

Stress is natural and stimulates action and performance. The onset of stress entices the brain into growing new cells that encode information and patterns retrievable from memory. Excessive or constant stress and anxiety overwhelm the body's immune system and negatively impact cognitive functioning. Lawyers face stressful interactions or tasks continually throughout the typical workday, which, with the proliferation of electronic communications, unfortunately lasts well into the night. Work is always lurking in the next

view of the mobile device or triggered by a comment or other stimuli. Work is just fingertips away.

Due to our natural biological cycles, most people's productivity diminishes dramatically after working about 90 minutes uninterrupted on any one task. The scientists label this the "ultradian rhythm," which is the rest-activity cycle present when awake or asleep and involving 90-minute patterns moving between higher and lower alertness. Awareness of this rhythm provides a simple yet often overlooked way to improve performance.

The powers of concentration and learning and problem-solving skills may be restored and recharged simply by taking breaks. Most workdays can be structured into 90-minute segments. Consultants have achieved remarkable results by combining this approach with a few techniques geared to the practice of law.

Use paper calendars or day books with monthly and daily views. Use pencils with erasers.

Start a task list with your own variation of "now," "soon" and "maybe." Electronic calendars and apps may be most suitable to use for this function.

Enter the fixed events, including personal appointments and time off. Checkmark 100-percent commitments. Include mandated administrative tasks or other non-client events. Use question marks for tentative activities. Start with the upcoming week or other appropriate time period and then estimate the number of blocks of consecutive minutes remaining devoted to mental tasks. Periods of two to four weeks are realistic for predictability. Triage tasks with an estimate of completion minutes. Determine if mental tasks such as writing a brief, reviewing a document or preparing for litigation must be done in stages because of required input of information from or review by a colleague or client. Map out a timetable for each separate task and the combined tasks. Go back to add evenings and weekends or to modify the check marks and question marks. Recalibrate and slot tasks on the paper calendar.

Map out the focused-activity periods of time. Build in the breaks. Administrative activities may function as breaks. Events and interruptions will emerge, requiring a reprioritization of tasks.

Monitor daily action under the plan. Maybe you are recharged after a 10-minute walk or some quiet time. Reading a newspaper, eating, exercising, talking on the phone or running errands might work. Do not become stressed or disappointed about modifications. Psychologists note the “planning fallacy,” which is a slide into the best-case scenario based upon optimism and overconfidence. Don’t spend too much time fussing with the calendar. Find downtime for revisions. A crude road map gets you close enough.

Integrate the paper and electronic calendars and set electronic reminders.

Enhancing Cognitive Performance

Peak performance is intermittent and not sustainable over prolonged periods. Optimal performance occurs when there are clear short-term objectives that are not too easy or too hard to reach. Immediate feedback enhances performance. Unless collaborating with colleagues or clients or at a hearing, obtaining such feedback is unlikely to happen.

One lawyer I admire has only a table, his laptop and a phone in his office. There is a “Do Not Disturb” sign too. He works only one file at a time. Law firms should provide small rooms with only a desk and a computer for protected space in which to think and work.

Personal experience proves what works for you. Many center themselves by quiet reflection, including through meditation, yoga or other contemplative practices. Improved health and mental concentration are benefits of regular contemplative practice. Many law schools now have mindfulness courses in their curricula.

Personal Care

Good health reduces stress and promotes productivity. The benefits of regular exercise are proven; however, many busy professionals don’t get enough sleep. Research indicates that the brain consolidates and processes information while sleeping. The advice that we should “sleep on” important decisions is supported by recent scientific research.

The brain consumes 20 percent of our energy intake, so proper nutrition is critical

to effective cognitive processing. Even though a moderate amount of caffeine in the system is healthy short-term and long-term, avoid caffeine bursts. Research indicates the cognitive benefits of certain foods to lower blood pressure, protect against heart disease, and enhance memory and learning. For example, studies have found that resveratrol, a compound that plants produce in response to injury, improves both spatial learning and memory. The fact that resveratrol is abundant in red-grape skins indicates the potential benefit of drinking moderate amounts of red wine. Blueberries and peanut butter are also sources of resveratrol, as is chocolate, which is primarily cocoa. Because chocolate has the additional ingredients of sugar and fat, the Mayo Clinic website recommends adding cocoa to low-fat milk or oats. Nuts and fish are rich in omega-3 oils. Vegetables have essential nutrients. Many doctors advise against supplements, including commercial beverages with antioxidants added or in lieu of fruits and vegetables, in order that you avoid overdoses of minerals and vitamins. ♦

Takeaways

- Make lists.
- Plan office time.
- Concentrate in 90-minute periods of time.
- Get enough sleep and proper nutrition.



Pittsburgh lawyer Robert A. Creo has mediated and arbitrated thousands of cases since 1979, including serious-injury and death claims, complex business transactions and cases involving multimillion-dollar settlements. Among other things, he has served as a salary arbitrator for Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association, as a grievance arbitrator for the National Football League and the National Football League Players Association and as a neutral for the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Ethics, Office of Fair Employment Practices. He is an adjunct professor at Duquesne University School of Law.



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