

## So Much to Do, So Little Time

### Small Steps to Focus your Legal Practice

This morning I read an article in Fast Company which was an interview with David H. Maister, our friend, colleague and recognized expert in professional service firms.

For many years David has given lawyers a little quiz. He asks that you divide your practice into three categories.

1. I love this stuff
2. I can tolerate it, but that's why they call it work and
3. How the hell did I end up doing this junk?

Go ahead – think about your own practice and in terms of percentages and divide it up.



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Second part of the quiz is to think about the clients you serve and put them into three categories.

1. I really like these people, I enjoy serving them,
2. I can tolerate them – I give them good service because I'm responsible and
3. I don't like these people and their industry is unbelievably boring.

Again – think about the people you serve and put them into these categories.

Around the world it appears that about 20% of lawyers are doing work they love for people they really like; 60-70% are serving people and doing work they can tolerate but for which they have no passion, and 10 -20% of lawyers are doing work they hate for people they can't stand.

The good news is that you can change it. You may begin with getting to know an industry that you find fascinating, meeting one new client who you really enjoy and attracting one new matter that is both stimulating and enjoyable. It requires two things – the courage to identify and seek out the new stuff and a complete attitude adjustment about the work you are currently doing.

Focusing your career requires a bit of courage – ok a lot. It requires some commitment of your discretionary time. What discretionary time? Well, it's a bit like finding time to exercise – if it is a priority you'll do it, if it is not a priority you won't. You can use up several hours a week talking about doing something, or you can actually spend some of those hours actually doing something.

Here's an example: Perhaps you have an undergraduate degree of science. You didn't envision yourself tied to a bench in a lab for your life so you went on to law school. You

literally fell into your current practice area – let’s say insurance defense work. Here you are ten years at the bar with a busy insurance practice but a burning desire to do something else. Pick an industry: let’s use biotech in this example because you’ve always had an interest in science – specifically life sciences.

### **Set a Goal**

“Two years from now I want clients to view me as a capable litigator with particular expertise in biotech. Go a little further – “particular expertise in the insurance aspects of biotech facilities.” This builds on your past experience while getting you into a new area from which to grow a more focused practice. Go a little further – “particular expertise in disputes between biotech companies and their suppliers”. Ok, you get the idea.

### **Take Action**

What actions can you take (beginning now) that will build your knowledge in the biotech sector? You can begin to gather information. Who are the players in the sector – make a list of prospects. Has anyone in your firm ever done any work in the sector? Do a search in your records and accounting system.

If, for example, anyone in another practice area has done work for any of your prospects, you may have an opportunity to cross sell your expertise. (*Cross selling is not about waiting for new files to be delivered to your desk. Cross selling is about you taking the initiative to **deliver something of value** to someone else and through him/her to a client.*)

### **Find Your Audience**

As you gather information make a list of the issues that might be of concern to your prospects. Can you do some research and write about those issues? Where could you publish your work? What do decision makers in the biotech sector read? Are there journalists that regularly write on the biotech sector – who are they and how can you contact them?

What conferences do the decisions makers in the sector attend? Conference organizers are always looking for good new thinkers in the area. Develop a pitch to speak on a particular topic and contact the conference organizers in the sector.

### **Build Perception**

Through things you write about, through speaking opportunities and attending conferences, you will begin to build perception about your connection to the sector, your knowledge of it and your expertise.

### **Ask for the Work**

Once you have built a perception about your capability, don’t forget to ask for the work. General counsels tell me that one of the ways to get the opportunity of serving them is to

simply pick up the phone, go and visit them and add value. If you see an issue in the morning paper about a company in the sector and you have a way of solving the business problem, pick up the phone. Better yet, send of a note with some thoughts and follow up with a phone call later in the day. *Take action.*

## An Attitude Adjustment

Back to the pile of work in your office that you can barely tolerate; that my friend is going to fund your newly focused legal career. As Mr. Maister said many years ago, 'your billable time is your income and your non-billable time is your future'. Do that work to the best of your ability and just get it done. Work efficiently and look at it as the platform that will launch the new stuff. Your current work pays your salary, your overhead and your investment in your future. See its value.

## What Gets Measured, Gets Done

I use a spreadsheet to measure my actions and my results. It's very simple but very effective. It looks something like this.

Actions	Jan	Feb	Mar	etc.
<p><i>Learning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry reading</li> <li>• Networking and knowledge building activities</li> </ul>				
<p><i>Profile Building</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing Opportunities</li> <li>• Speaking Opportunities</li> <li>• Networking/Conferences               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ When, Where, Who</li> </ul> </li> </ul>				
<p><i>Business Development</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposals for new work               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Note every time you have an opportunity to pitch new work and your desired area.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>A really good success rate is 1 in 3 – this means you will fail to get the file 2 times out of 3 but keep at it!</p>				
<p><i>Success</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Matters – celebrate your successes</li> </ul>				

Think of the work you want to do as the big rocks in a bucket – put them in first. Fill around those rocks with gravel and sand (your existing work) so that you have enough work to remain profitable. You need to be profitable to remain in your firm. Remain profitable as you shift your practice.



If you stand still in professional services you are falling behind. If, however, you have the courage to focus and take intentional steps to control your practice, you will join those gifted few who do work they love for people then enjoy serving.

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