

# INCREASING YOUR UTILIZATION RATE

By Judi Craig, Ph.D., MCC

At the end of your work week, do you find yourself thinking, “Where has all my time gone? If I’m working this hard, why am I not making more money?” The answer to your question can be found in your utilization rate: the number of hours you billed divided by the number of hours you worked (including nights and weekends) over a set period (weekly or monthly). The resulting percentage is an effective method of tracking the productivity of you and others in your firm. Eighty percent means you are being efficient. If the percentage is lower, you’re not using your time efficiently, and you are probably feeling overworked and underpaid. But how can you raise that percentage?

Controlling interruptions is critical. The average interruption takes approximately seven minutes and three additional minutes to recover. That means that if you have ten interruptions a day (average), then 100 minutes a day is lost in productivity. If that happens five days per week, you have lost 500 minutes or eight hours that week.

The first step in increasing your productivity is to track your interruptions for a few days. Then, analyze the pattern. Are they internally created (surfing the Internet, personal calls) or externally created (staff asking questions, colleagues dropping by to chat)? Of course, about 20% of the interruptions are likely to be important and necessary. Those interruptions are not the ones that are causing the problem. Once you have a realistic assessment of what is causing those unnecessary interruptions, you can create a procedure or system to eliminate or reduce them.

The second step is to schedule production time in your calendar, palm pilot, or day planner. Such time should

be sacrosanct and only rescheduled for genuine emergencies. It may be an hour, perhaps more. You must do everything possible to eliminate any interruptions during this time. Thus, you do not read email, answer the phone, listen to voice mail, or chat with colleagues. And you close your door, perhaps having a sign on the outside that says “Power Hour” or some other message.

For this plan to be effective, you must get your support staff on board. This means having someone answer the phone during this time who will put through only your very short-list of exceptions. Your assistant should be able to tell the caller, “Ms. Jones is behind closed doors right now; may I be of help?” or if you are the only one who can answer the caller, “May she call you between 11:30 and noon? Or would 4:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. this afternoon work better for you?”

If you are worried that your colleagues may interpret your closed door as not very friendly, some up-front education can help. Let them know that you are experimenting with a new procedure to work more effectively and that you will certainly be available to them at other times in the day. Once they see how much more successful you are in completing your work, they may begin having their own Power Hours.

For most attorneys, the best time for production is during the morning. In fact, a schedule that works when attorneys are not in court is to review and prioritize their day, make any calls that need to be made first thing, and then settle into their Power Hour (or two). The time to return calls and emails is immediately after the Power Hour.

If your staff barrages you with questions, create a form for them to write

down questions as they occur. Then when your door is open, they can bring the form to you and get their answers. Or, consider having a brief five-to-ten-minute meeting after your production time to answer their questions.

You may find it helpful to schedule clients in the afternoon when you may feel more like interacting with people after you have had some good production time that morning. Of course, you may prefer to see clients in the morning and do your production time after lunch or in the late afternoon. The point is that you should schedule your production hour(s) at the time of day when you feel the most energetic and focused.

If you have a trial, obviously you are not going to be able to observe your schedule, but when the trial is over, revert to your default schedule immediately.

Simply by blocking out the time you need for production and keeping it sacred (free from all but absolutely necessary interruptions), you will raise that utilization percentage.☞



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