

Random tips on *survival* By David Barnfield



Everyone practises the law in their own way.

Given the recent emphasis on how the law can get you down, the following ideas are provided to help you avoid some of the pitfalls of legal practice.

1. Reward yourself!

Reward yourself at least once a week. In fact, reward yourself more often just for plugging away at files. This can be as simple as spending time out of the office. There is no harm in dropping everything and wandering down the street for a coffee.

If you finalise a difficult matter, allow yourself time to appreciate your achievement.

No one else is going to congratulate you on a job well done and if you happen to be a hard task-master, you may fall into the trap of just tossing the file aside and grabbing the next one. Refrain from the tendency to underestimate your own efforts.

2. Move! And have Lunch.

Get up regularly. Sitting down for long periods is bad for you.

Move! Take a five minute break every hour. Go for a short walk. Do a few push-ups. Annoy someone. Get out of the office. Have a glass of water and make sure you have lunch. Try to eat away from your office; the worst thing is to eat quickly at your desk and to keep working.

3. Friday Night and the Weekend

The key is not to drink too much on Friday evening! You have been working all week and now the weekend beckons. If you "tie one on" then most of the following day is wasted. Start with a glass of water or squash. If you are drinking wine, make sure you eat something.

Whatever you do, don't write out a huge list of things to do on the weekend. Some people arm themselves with a list and plan to do everything. By 5.00pm Saturday they are still trying to get started due to all the interruptions. Just attend to the essential personal and family things and try to give yourself and those around you free time to relax.

And avoid files whenever possible!

4. Say NO! And apply the 85% Rule

If you are already snowed under at work you might need to say no to new files. It's more rewarding doing fewer files well and gaining some appreciation of what's actually happening than churning through a whole lot of matters blindly putting out costs. If the latter is what the firm requires of you, you may be in the wrong place.

You are allowed to enjoy your work. When you feel pressure rise in your chest or tingling sensations at the back of your head, listen to your body! You can fool yourself only so long and the time will come when you fall ill or begin suffering backaches and neck aches.

If you are working hard and have the added responsibilities of parenthood, you have to learn to say no and also learn to apply the "85%" Rule.

This is a generous rule for once: essentially, not every task deserves the same energy.

You owe it to yourself, your friends and family to take care of yourself. If you let clients and the firm take over your life, they will. They always ride the willing horse and you have to learn to say no and put those you love first.

5. Priorities and Goals

A simple way to remind yourself of your priorities is to keep a favourite photo at work. Make sure you place it where you have to see it each day and move it around occasionally so it doesn't become part of the furniture.

Goals have to be realistic or you will wear yourself out worrying. Self-help books abound on this topic so read one. "My Best Year Yet" is a useful tool for those who like planning ahead.

6. To Sue or not to Sue

If a client leaves you in the lurch owing \$10,000, what you do?

The immediate reaction is to sue: "There is no way he is getting away with it! I have busted my guts on that file! And I didn't even charge for all the time!"

If you give it more thought, an alternative approach such as simply letting it go, might start to appeal to you.

Why might you want to let it go?

- In the long run, you can earn more than the amount you may eventually recover by focusing your energy in a positive way on existing and new files
- You may be better off cutting ties with the client rather than giving the already soured relationship oxygen to cause you more grief.
- Ultimately, it is possible you only have yourself to blame for not insisting on funds in trust before taking the matter on. The old boat-yard motto "no cash no splash" is worth remembering.
- You have already learned a valuable lesson. In future, don't work for people who are not prepared to pay each month or place funds in trust sufficient to cover your fees.

Rather than spending a year chasing payment with the possibility of a complaint against you - a favourite tactic of clients in this situation - you need to take a step back and think long and hard before you embark on recovery action.

If you are determined to have a go, instruct another firm. As you know, if you act for yourself you have a fool for a client.

7. Holidays and Outside Interests

A lot of people in busy professions including the law promise themselves time off but never get around to marking off days in the diary. You need to physically cross off the days in biro and be vigilant about keeping them free from all appointments.

Go away if you can, come home refreshed and even use the first day or two back at work to review your daily routines.

Make sure you have things to do outside the law on a regular basis. Take the Harley for a ride, go fishing, play social netball or do some gardening.

This is all very obvious but many practitioners ignore it once their work load increases and they succumb to the temptation of over indulging in food and wine and sedentary pursuits such as television.

8. Brain and Heart *(Courtesy of the ABC)*

The brain has more blood vessels per centimetre than any part of our bodies. It gets all its energy from the blood and cannot store energy. For that reason alone, regular exercise is essential to keep up cardio-vascular fitness.

The brain needs social interaction with other people to keep it alive and functioning well.

New experiences exercise the brain well. Your brain needs Omega 3 fatty acids (fish) B group vitamins, Vitamin C, Vitamin E and Vitamin A (carrots) and steady glucose.

And it needs to be kept hydrated. So drink plenty of water. A healthy diet and exercise regime mean a healthy heart.

9. Emotions

Lawyers can be a strange lot in the emotion department. Often in practice you have to conceal what you really think and feel. If you are running a jury trial for example, you can't always be yourself or let on what your true feelings are. If your day job requires you to constantly be on guard and suppress your feelings, what happens?

Eventually something gives. That is why you have to "debrief" and give yourself a chance to relax. And if you feel lonely you have to talk to people.

Talking to work colleagues is helpful and you also have to make an effort to let your family and close friends know what is going on in your world. They may not realise how tough it is for you at times. You won't get all the sympathy you deserve initially but at least by raising the topic you'll have made an important start.

At the end of the day anyone can work hard and spend long hours at the office. It's easy! But not everyone knows how to work less hard and transfer some energy to their friends and family. That can be a hard balancing act. Many lawyers seek refuge in their files which become the default escape from other things going on in their lives. Try to avoid this if possible! You owe it to yourself to get out and about regularly with family and friends and recapture a hint of that sense of warmth and wellbeing you enjoyed during the last long Summer holidays!

2010.

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