

Avoid Office Burnout: Strategies For Legal Administrators

By Sherry Hurst

In today's economy, law firms are striving to achieve maximum productivity. Employees are taking on a heavier workload than ever before. This environment offers legal administrators at all levels a wide range of exciting new opportunities that provide the potential for significant intellectual and financial rewards.

Accompanying this dynamic environment are increased pressures -- most profoundly, the demand to work with greater efficiency and speed. As stimulating and fulfilling as the contemporary legal atmosphere can be, there is also the possibility of a downside: the chance that in your eagerness to maximize your skills and take advantage of the profession's many possibilities, you will spread yourself too thin and become burned out. Here are a few pointers for helping you recognize possible warning signals and take appropriate action:

Understand the Cause

The best way to prevent burnout is to recognize and avoid situations that cause it. Keep in mind that stress is not necessarily a sign of overwork. In many law firms and departments, morale can reach a peak when legal administrators and other staff members are actively immersed in a number of compelling assignments and cases.

However, the environment itself can raise your tension level. For example, while the combination of a thinly-staffed legal team and a series of unreasonably tight deadlines may in the short-term provide a sense of exhilaration, over the long-term, this last-minute, harried workstyle can leave you feeling fatigued and even mildly unsatisfied with the quality of your work. And when you start to feel consistently tired, it becomes difficult to perform even basic tasks at the high quality level you and others expect.

In many ways, though, these signals of professional erosion are subtle. It's critical, therefore, that you pay close attention to such indicators of burnout as:

- Repeatedly missing deadlines or feeling that you're constantly overwhelmed and in danger of falling behind
- Increasing and overt negativity relating to clients, cases, attorneys and the office in general
- A rise in absenteeism, brought on by colds, flu or other factors
- No longer taking an aggressive, self-starting approach to your work -- a sense that you're "going through the motions" and waiting for the end of the work day.

Any of these symptoms should be taken quite seriously. Even if you're unable to solve the problems immediately, your willingness to acknowledge that they indeed exist is the first step in changing the situation.

Tips for Avoiding Burnout

The good news is that once you have recognized potential burnout, there are steps you can take to nip it in the bud before it significantly impacts your performance. Here are a few guidelines:

- **Prioritize**

When you're in the middle of an extremely hectic period, it's difficult to make time for prioritizing your tasks. There's a tendency to feel like you're constantly bouncing from one activity to another, with no sense of genuine accomplishment.

But if you're to avoid burnout, you must be vigilant in establishing where you devote most of your efforts. It's been well-documented that the most effective, productive professionals -- not just in law, but in all disciplines -- regularly make lists detailing their most important tasks and goals. Take time for this at the beginning of every workday. Even just five minutes of planning can go a long way towards keeping you focused and less likely to feel the confusion that can precede burnout. Divide your list into three categories: things that must be done today, things that would be nice to do today, and items that can wait. This will help you prioritize and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

- **Delegate tasks**

In the course of planning, you'll also determine which tasks you should personally be performing, as well as which activities can be delegated. For example, over the years you may have found yourself being responsible for the final proofreading documents. As good as you may be at this, and as important as it is to the firm's clients and attorneys that these materials be error-free, in many instances it might be more valuable for you to teach this skill to a more junior level coworker while you spend your time doing work others are unable to do, such as complicated research.

- **Request help**

But even once you've delegated work to others on your staff, stress can still build up during peak workload periods. To alleviate these demands, you may want to talk with someone about bringing in temporary legal professionals who can provide expertise and assistance like litigation discovery or administrative support. In some cases, simply adding a few extra bodies can go a long way towards keeping you refreshed.

- **Improve processes**

In addition to looking for appropriate ways to solve short-term staffing problems, gather your colleagues and conduct brainstorming sessions on ways you might improve existing processes. Discuss the status of key cases, clients and other concerns. For example, might there be a faster, smoother method for preparing the supporting documents for a deposition? Or, on a more administrative basis, are there easier ways to input time so that the firm can streamline its billing process? Giving yourself permission to step back and approach your work broadly and creatively -- even if you do this on your own for only 15 minutes a week -- is a great way to relieve pressure and revitalize your job.

- **Take care of yourself**

Just because there's a lot of work to be done doesn't mean you should neglect your needs. Don't pass up meals or rush through a 5-minute lunch at your desk. While staying late at the office is frequently necessary in the legal profession, don't fool yourself into thinking you need to do this night after night. When you're away from work, look for ways to unwind and relax. Get plenty of sleep. If you're sick, don't come to the office and work at half your usual capacity. It's much better that you stay home, fully recover and approach your work with the high energy people expect from you.

While the demands of law virtually guarantee a competent legal administrator the chance to be continuously busy, the challenge is to manage your energy level effectively. After all, law is a field for professionals committed to sustained, long-term growth. Granted, there will be many instances when you'll need to go into overdrive, but the more strategic you can be in detecting and treating potential signs of burnout, the better off you'll be in building a lengthy career that's stimulating and rewarding -- not just for you, but for your firm and its clients.

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