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## Message From the Chair

By Ramit Mizrahi

Most days, I love my practice. I delight in trying cases, taking depositions, buckling down to research and brief thorny legal issues, and advocating on behalf of my clients. Good days are ones where I have fruitful conversations, engage my intellect, move my cases along, and feel like I accomplished something. The best days are ones where I help bring peace and closure to my clients, whether by resolving a case in mediation, negotiating a settlement directly, or getting a case to verdict/award.

Yet some days, it seems like I go nonstop at 100 miles an hour, dealing with calls, emails, and a seemingly endless task list with nary a break, yet feel like I have little to show for my efforts. Most of us have experienced days like this.

Below, I share some of the best tools and practices I use to help make my workdays as efficient and productive as possible. Each person's work situation is different, and what may work for a small plaintiff-side practice may not work at a large management-side firm. But my hope is that if you are reading this, you will find at least one tidbit that made it worth your time.

### TOOLS

**Asana.** Asana.com is an invaluable web-based and phone app-based tool for tracking tasks, deadlines, and other obligations. Among other things, it allows you to set up projects (I have one for each client, along with ones for other activities, such as my Section work); set deadlines; assign tasks to individuals on your team; create subtasks; leave comments/notes; and create template projects that can be cloned. Asana sends

my team daily reminder emails about our respective tasks as well as email notifications when tasks are assigned, updated, or completed (you can tweak notification settings). Asana gives me the peace of mind that all critical tasks will be completed, and lets me know what those on my team are working on. Asana is free for small businesses (up to 15 users); a premium version allows users to access additional features.

**Slack.** Slack.com is a souped-up chat app that is a great way to stay connected with your team. You can set up one-on-one chat channels and group chats. It can be a quicker way to communicate than email, and has other useful purposes. It's a good way to know when people are in/out, especially when working remotely. Slack can be accessed through an app or a web browser. It has a free version for small businesses; a premium version allows users to access additional features.

**Google Apps for Work.** Google's suite of business apps uses two-factor authentication to keep data secure. I use Gmail, Google Calendar, and Google Drive, and find each of these indispensable. When it comes to email, I am a huge proponent of Inbox Zero, so I try not to keep any message in my inbox unless I have yet to review/respond. In Gmail, one of my favorite features is the snooze button, which returns an email to my inbox at a time/date that I designate. I use it to ensure that nothing falls through the cracks; if I would prefer to respond at a later time, am awaiting a response from someone on an important matter, or need to take further action but don't want to add the

item to my Asana task list, the return of the email into my inbox prompts me to take action.

Google Drive allows me to sync my files across all of my devices. It has version control (going back about 30 days), so you can pull prior versions if need be. It also makes collaboration simple, as I can determine which files or folders are shared with others on my team. It can be useful in allowing multiple users to see document updates in real time or to simultaneously edit or redline the same document/spreadsheet. The suite costs \$5/user/month for 30GB of storage per person, or \$10/user/month for unlimited cloud storage.

**X1.** X1 is a desktop search program that enables you to conduct detailed searches through your computer files. (I believe you can also set it up to search through emails, but I have not used it that way.) How many times have you racked your brain trying to remember the case where you briefed a particular issue? With X1, you can search files by file name, file type, text search through file contents, date, location, and other categories. This means that if you've done something before, you can easily pull it up again without having to figure out when/where you have that file saved. The useful preview panel makes it easy to go through the documents that fit your criteria. I have also used it to do initial searches through document dumps by opposing counsel (it's much faster than Relativity, though you cannot mark documents as responsive, etc.). X1 costs \$96 per license, with an optional \$19.95 annual fee for support and access to updates.

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**Line2.** Line2 is an excellent phone and fax system that allows business calls to be handled from anywhere in the world with cell or internet reception. It delivers calls and texts to any device, whether a cell phone, land line, or computer/tablet (the latter using their app). Line2 gives you a number of useful tools for call handling. It allows you to set up an auto-attendant with different keypress menu options (to forward calls to different lines, send calls straight to voicemail, give different messages, etc.), screen calls, set procedures for after-hours calls, and handle callers differently depending on whether they are in your contacts list. Line2 also allows you to forward calls to several numbers at a time (say an office line and cell phone, or two employees). It also transcribes voicemail messages. Line2 costs about \$150/user/year, and \$200/user/year with fax added.

## PRACTICES

**Time blocking.** Once the emails and phone calls start pouring in, it can be hard to find uninterrupted time to focus on larger, more thought-intensive tasks. I am always wildly productive when I can shut off outside distractions. (That's why I love working on planes and trains. Indeed, I'm writing this from 30,000+ feet up in the air at the start of my vacation!) For that reason, I try to set aside at least an hour a day of uninterrupted work time, or more if I have a deadline I am trying to meet.

**Go paperless.** My office is completely paperless. As a general practice, I ask all opposing counsel in new cases whether they will agree to electronic service, which saves everyone time and money. When any incoming paper mail comes in (pleadings, discovery, letters, bills, and

anything but junk mail), it is scanned to a folder titled "Scan Incoming." I get an alert in Slack that mail arrived and has been scanned. When I have time, I go through the Scan Incoming folder, review, process as needed (e.g., instructing my paralegal to add a deadline to Asana and to my Google Calendar), and move documents to the appropriate folders.

**Create templates/delegate.** For those who don't have access to firm-wide templates, create your own. Over time, having rich templates allows you to have consistency in your work product and to delegate down. Indeed, I have found that my employees have been able to do very high-quality work fairly quickly because they have solid templates to work from. (It also helps to hire smart people!)

**Down time.** Given our profession, it's easy to be "on" all the time. With smartphones at everyone's fingertips, people are often expected to be readily available at all hours of the day. Many feed into the expectation by frequently checking their phones and filling idle time with a peek at email or social media. (Who hasn't checked their email while waiting in line at the supermarket?) Yet technology takes its toll. High smartphone usage has been linked to significantly higher levels of isolation, depression, and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> There is no sense of rest when one is permanently connected; weekdays and weeknights blur together, as do weekdays and weekends. And for what? Smartphones do not necessarily make us more productive. Indeed, a 2017 study found that the mere presence of one's smartphone nearby can adversely affect cognitive functioning.<sup>2</sup> For me, disconnecting from all gadgets

is beneficial both personally and professionally. It lets me feel more rested and relaxed. I have also come to realize that many of my best and most creative ideas have hit me when I have been left to my own thoughts, whether while walking, driving, running an errand, even when trying to fall asleep. Disconnecting is easier said than done (please don't make me wait in a long line without my phone!), but it is a very worthwhile endeavor. ☞

## CONCLUSION

I've shared my favorites. Now it's your turn! I'd love to hear about the invaluable tools or practices that have made your work easier. Email me at [ramit@mizrahilaw.com](mailto:ramit@mizrahilaw.com) with your best ideas.

## ENDNOTES

1. See Erik Peper & Richard Harvey, *Digital addiction: Increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression*, *NeuroRegulation* 5(1), 3–8 (2018), available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.15540/nr.5.1.3>.
2. See Adrian F. Ward, Kristen Duke, Ayelet Gneezy, and Maarten W. Bos, *Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity*, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* 2017 2:2, 140-154, available at <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/691462>; Tim Herrera, *Hide Your Phone When You're Trying to Work. Seriously.* N.Y. Times, Dec. 2, 2018, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/02/smarter-living/be-more-productive-hide-your-phone.html>.