

May 22, 2019

## PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

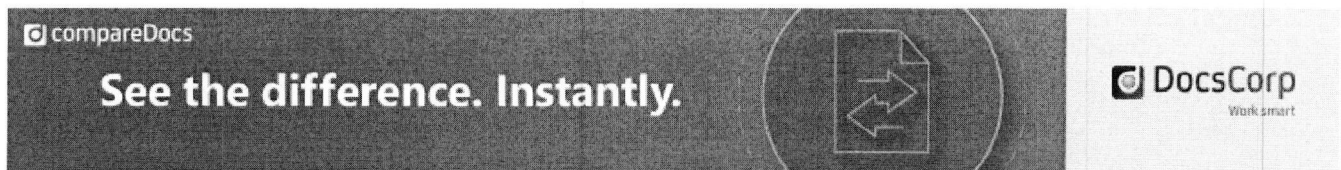
# Building a Practice: Combine the Power of Habit with Deep-Work Sessions to Get in Your Zone

By Lorenzo Perez

Share this:

*Powerful indeed is the empire of habit.* —Publilius Syrus

The extraordinary power of habit is a key that opens many doors and can lead to pathways toward powerfully constructive, productive, and positive development of practice skills. Naturally, the converse is true as well. Lack of awareness or emotional discord in the application of habit can have deleterious effects, exhibiting itself in self-defeating and self-destructive behavior.



For some, identifying which habit to change, enhance, or curtail is a matter of *res ipsa loquitur*, as some bad habits are obvious and scream for attention. Addiction to illicit drugs or pharmaceuticals, alcohol, etc., fall under this category. In such cases, lifting the cloud of addiction from one's life to reveal and release one's true personal and professional potential may be a critical matter with great urgency. Thankfully, many bar associations extend confidential referrals to treatment providers, group therapy, and medical support services to help when the power of a habit has gone terribly awry. The [ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs](#) supports local lawyer assistance programs to make such services widely available to lawyers.

Habits can also unleash phenomenally constructive and creative power; harnessed for productivity they can propel remarkable human achievement. Better still, combined with other powerfully productive techniques, they can exponentially increase the accomplishments that a habit alone could otherwise yield. For example, much research confirms the benefits of deep work; that is, long, uninterrupted bouts of concentrated effort that can propel the quality of one's work beyond normal standards to extraordinary dimensions. Frustratingly, in today's high-tech, ultra-connected

existence, deep-work sessions often seem utterly out of reach. Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, identifies omnipresent distractions such as electronic devices, social media, and e-mail as the culprits most guilty of fracturing and undermining the quality of our attention to producing quality work.

Colloquially, the state of mind obtained through deep work is referred to as “being in the zone,” a state of mind in which one feels entirely immersed, focused, and at one’s highest level of potential and enjoyment. The feeling is known to most; perhaps you recall sensing being in the zone when you wrote college papers, played a sport or an instrument, jogged long distances, or presented an in-court argument. It’s a feeling of full involvement, as if time stood still and your attention melded with the activity. Applying deep-work techniques to achieve the state of mind of “being in the zone” or “flow” has been the life’s work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a protégé of Carl Jung.

Csikszentmihalyi has accumulated a body of observations and research findings concerning particularly productive and creative people who describe with varying terminology the state of flow, characterized by complete absorption with their work. Facilitating the state of flow, though, requires amenable conditions. That’s where habit comes in to set the stage for regular, uninterrupted, focused work sessions. In two of his books, *Good Business: Leadership, Flow, and the Making of Meaning* and *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*, Csikszentmihalyi explains how our attention is diffused and control over our lives is hijacked by external forces. He investigates how presidents, CEO’s, football coaches, and many others find their “flow.” Lessons gleaned from the lives of managers and artists alike center on ways to develop habits and organize your life to regularly achieve optimal levels of concentration.

We can couple the power of habit with deep work and flow psychology, thereby increasing the likelihood of more consistently getting in the zone and attaining optimal legal practice. The inevitable result of combining these concepts is an alchemy that elevates practice skills, improves quality of pleadings and briefs, and results in practice management that is in synch with one’s life aspirations.

Examples of habits that invite deep work and flow include:

- ushering minor distractions to a weekly time slot for your response or attention so that distractions do not compromise the quality of more important work;
- turning off the cell phone and working at a library to conduct legal research;

- working in a designated conference room that is void of distracting devices;
- reserving blocks of time to scrutinize search warrants, medical records, or technical data that require sustained attention; and
- dedicating predictably less distracting time periods (such as early morning or weekends) to prepare and draft omniscient cross- and direct-examinations.

These and other similar habits are likely to elevate your practice in meaningful ways, but they require practice management and self-management skills intent on isolating and protecting long spans of time that are dedicated to realizing the highest level of practice attainable.

Fortunately, habits of thinking and behaving are malleable and can be self-influenced and changed for the better. So, when it comes to habits that directly affect how successful and satisfying our law practice will be, we can improve and strengthen habits we want to change. There are myriad tasks in one's practice that really count, that contribute to the development of good analytical and advocacy skills, skills that produce meaningful, long-term results that greatly improve one's practice. Take time to identify, list, and reflect on which powerful habit(s) you want to foster; then protect your time, gently but firmly shepherd your attention away from distractions and interruptions that threaten a habit. Foster the habits that result in regularly scheduled, uninterrupted deep-thinking sessions. Such uninterrupted work sessions should stake their rightful claim in your calendar, a place where they are least likely to be encumbered or interrupted by minor urgencies (usually urgencies of others, not yours) so they can propel your work to higher dimensions.

Take a moment to consider which positive habit would most grow your practice in the manner you value. Identify one habit that you believe is significant and worthy of effort to change, one that can serve as a catalyst to implement the change you want in your practice and your life. Incremental, positive changes to any one habit can be brought about by attending to it; that is, by thinking about it and questioning yourself throughout each day as to whether you are coming along toward your goal. By doing so, you will hone your awareness of what, if anything, hinders further development of that positive habit and, even more crucially, what nurtures it.

Cultivate the chosen habit by developing techniques to shield it from disruptions and intrusions. For example, a colleague or client vying for time and attention that threatens the realization of your deep-work session can delicately and honestly be redirected with: "I understand what you're asking, and I want to give you my focused, undivided attention. I'll call you or meet with you two

hours from now so I can give you and this matter my full, undistracted attention.” Most always, clients will appreciate that you recognize and acknowledge their important matter and value it enough to commit and schedule time to tend to it. This is a far better and more preferable outcome than to compromise the quality of your practice while begrudgingly surrendering to an interruptive client call, only to participate with a half-hearted, distracted state of mind. Instead, communicate that their problem is important to you and you will dedicate the necessary time and mental bandwidth to their concerns—clients are sure to recognize and appreciate this for what it is: an interaction with an attentive, in-control attorney who is a good listener, an outcome that is increasingly rare and valuable in all professions these days. Colleagues who receive such a response are likely to experience two simultaneous reactions: (1) recognition that you take their request seriously enough to schedule dedicated, uncompromised time to listen later, and (2) admiration that your tact and control is worthy of emulation.

One parting tip: As you strive to develop a positive habit, if you find it is threatened by a distraction, remind yourself that habits, coupled with deep work and flow, have the propensity to set the stage for optimizing your practice and your life. Habit is that powerful and important.

[Next Article >>>](#)

## Authors



### Lorenzo Perez

Lorenzo Perez is the principal of the Law Office of Lorenzo Perez in Boston, Massachusetts. He primarily practices civil trial and criminal defense law, regularly representing defendants in capital cases.

**ABA** American Bar Association

/content/aba-cms-dotorg/en/groups/gpsolo/publications/gpsolo\_ereport/2019/may-2019/building-practice-combine-power-habit-deep-work-sessions-get-your-zone