

Why Big Law Should Consider a Digital Declutter

In a noisy world, loosening the ties to your devices can lead to better attorney well-being and improved lawyering.

By Jennifer Breen

What if I told you that I became a better lawyer by signing off email and putting down my phone?

As a partner with Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, a law firm with 31 offices and clients based around the world, I know that would seem impossible in this global economy. For my colleagues and me, someone, somewhere is always “on,” in order to serve our clients in the best way possible.

So when I first heard author and speaker Cal Newport’s call for a digital decluttering, my initial reaction was that while it seemed like a great objective to strive for, there was no way a lawyer like me could use less technology and keep up with the demands of the profession and my own personal expectations with respect to client service.

But in his new book, “Digital Minimalism,” Newport lays out a case for why and how minimizing technology can help you stay focused and can lead to better attorney well-being in a noisy world. And it actually works.

Use technology effectively. Digital minimalism does not mean banishing technology; rather, it is the art of optimizing your technology in a way that helps you achieve what is most important to you. As a mom and a lawyer, I have my phone with me constantly. But with ever-evolving apps and new technology marketed to



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make our lives easier, I had to start looking critically and determining their real value to me, not the perceived one.

I basically Marie Kondo’d my technology. By examining what really mattered to me—striving to be an excellent lawyer for my clients, staying engaged with my colleagues and friends, and always being accessible to my kids and spouse—I was able to weed out the clutter.

The first step was using social media like a professional. I could easily spend hours on social media, sneakily broken down into quick-minute breaks. “Digital Minimalism” challenged me to ask myself: Was that activity furthering the values that really mattered to me? Sharing my insights

on social media platforms is important, as is hearing from those I am connected with.

However, setting specific times in the morning to check Twitter or LinkedIn allowed me to stay caught up on news that’s relevant to my clients in specific industries, find people who should be part of my professional network, and share my views. By being intentional about the time I spent on each site as a business and professional development tool, instead of a mental break or reflexive habit, I was able to choose which technological tools were actually moving me closer to my goals.

Manage that multitasking. The idea of being intentional about using technology

extends beyond just social media. I have always prided myself on my ability to multitask. After reading Newport's prior book, "Deep Work," I became more critical of this behavior. As a frequent offender of quickly checking my emails while in meetings or on calls, I've realized that this behavior is distracting. As Newport explains, when multitasking we are not really doing two things at once; rather, we are shifting our attention back and forth quickly between two things, which means I'm not effectively bringing my attention to either task.

To combat this, I've begun to look critically at the length of the meetings I've scheduled. Rather than scheduling an hour-long meeting, I look for ways to cut it to 30 or 45 minutes, and I've made a rule: no checking phones or multitasking for anyone in attendance.

Working with clients and colleagues across the country, I've also looked for opportunities to use video conferences more frequently. At Morgan Lewis we have the technology that allows me to video chat with a colleague as easily as I can speak on the phone. I've found that it forces both of us to put down our phones, look away from our emails and really focus on just what is being discussed. Our conversations are quicker and more productive—plus, I get to see people in other offices. Recently, I was even able to hold a video conference with a counterparty at the Internal Revenue Service, which made for a much better dialogue between us.

Through that small change, I am able to use technology to increase my personal interactions and the quality of my conversations. As a lawyer, I feel that the value of these personal relationships cannot be overstated. While email will most likely be the preferred form of communication for years to come, being able to better utilize

technology for conversation-centric communication is incredibly important. If that's using a calendar function to set up face-to-face meetings, or concentrating on one phone call or one video chat, technology is helping us feel less isolated.

The importance of solitude. While having conversations and personal interactions is incredibly important, so is quiet solitude and the space to think. Our clients look to us to think critically about the law, the evolution of their industry, and the regulatory environment we are in, and deliver them the most insightful and strategic advice possible. To do that, we need time to think. When we are constantly checking emails or allowing our attention to be diverted by ever-present technology, we are not allowing ourselves that important act of deep thinking.

Newport says in "Digital Minimalism," "When you avoid solitude you miss out on the positive things it brings you: the ability to clarify hard problems, to regulate your emotions, to build moral courage, and to strengthen relationships."

To ensure that I have the time available to me to focus on working through those hard problems, I have begun to block off time on my calendar that is devoted to "deep work." This ensures that my week doesn't get gobbled up with calls, meetings and responding to emails—all of which are important—but if not managed, can quickly edge out opportunities for quiet solitude. Taking time out to really think through things with my full attention makes me a better lawyer. As a happy side-effect, it allows me to feel less rushed and more productive with the use of my time.

Prioritize well-being. We know that in order to deliver this level of service, we also need to thrive ourselves. Morgan Lewis just announced ML Well, a well-being pro-

gram focused on providing resources and support to assist our people in navigating the opportunities and challenges present in the legal profession. We were alarmed by the statistics reflecting high levels of anxiety, stress and depression in the legal profession, and we are committed to helping our partners, associates and staff combat that.

As I read "Digital Minimalism" it struck me that many of the concepts and practices Newport promotes are consistent with promoting well-being. Prioritizing human connection and deeper relationships over "likes" and choosing to use technology in a way that aligns with the specific priorities and values that we determine prioritize well-being.

Having conversations and a game plan with my associates and teammates about our use of email is another way we can do that. We receive emails around the clock, seven days a week. We've all received that late-night email, right as we are about to fall asleep and we ask ourselves: Do we respond or can it wait until morning? Talking with my team about when we should expect responses and when we can wait until the next business day takes that pressure and anxiety away and helps to prioritize well-being.

I am never going to give up my smartphone, delete my social media accounts, or quit sending emails. But I will be more mindful about the way I use that technology. I'm more present, less distracted, and hopefully a better lawyer because of it.

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