

Overcoming Business Development Procrastination

By [LawVision](#) on February 15, 2013

I often ask groups of lawyers to brainstorm with me to list obstacles they experience when attempting business development activities. I want to know from them the answer to the question “When it comes to business development, what gets in your way?” Here are common answers I get:

- I don't have time
- I've never been trained
- I don't know where to start
- I fear rejection
- It feels unprofessional
- I don't enjoy it
- It's not natural for me – not my personality
- The firm does not give me a sufficient financial incentive
- It's too hard – everyone is already represented
- Doing good work ought to be enough

Many of these answers track with a list I recently found posted on the [American Psychological Association's website](#) containing the top 15 rationalizations for procrastination.

Part of my job is to help my individual coaching clients understand the underlying reason for their business development procrastination so we can attack the problem together and move forward. For many, I help them shift the fundamental paradigm from business development as a task tacked onto their “real career” (much like filling out a time sheet) to business development as a means to carve out a career filled with people and work they enjoy. For others, simple fear, lack of training or thinking that a certain type of personality is a prerequisite to successful business development gets in the way.

When working with procrastination issues, I often use something called the Zeigarnik effect to help people get started. You can use this tool to overcome procrastination in a variety of settings. At its core, the method can be reduced to a simple phrase: “Take the first step.”



In his recent book [59 Seconds: Think a Little, Change a Lot](#), Richard Wiseman tells the story of a young

Russian psychology graduate student named Bluma Zeigarnik, who was seated at a café in Vienna in the 1920s observing the behavior of waiters. She noticed that the waiters had the ability to remember details of multiple food orders without writing them down. They retained this information until each check was paid. When queried after the check was paid, they struggled to remember items on the order.

Zeigarnik's study led her to conclude that starting a task creates a sort of psychic need or anxiety to complete what was started. If you begin and are then interrupted, the mind creates a way for you to remember what is necessary and pesters you until you've completed it.

The theory is often used with students. Those who suspend their studies briefly and undertake alternative activities (studying other subjects, playing foosball, etc.) tend to remember material better than do those who don't take a break.

[Psychologist Jeremy Dean](#) posits that procrastination is most crippling when we are faced with a large task and don't feel we have all the information to start. Lack of business development training hampers lawyers because they don't know where to begin and desperately don't want to fail. What the Zeigarnik effect teaches, as Dr. Dean points out, is that one way to beat procrastination is simply by starting whatever you've been avoiding. Just start somewhere. Don't attempt the hardest part first. Pick something trivial and easy, such as making a list or meeting with a coach or making a phone call. Once you've made a start, however trivial, you'll want to finish to allay the anxiety you feel around not having completed the task.

We use the Zeigarnik effect as a tool in our workshops by requiring participants to write down the names of people with whom they know they should be in touch. You can use it right now as you read this post. Write down a list of people you really ought to be keeping in touch with but haven't reached out to in the past six months. Keep it on your desk and then go back to the rest of your day. Perhaps making the list will create the anxious mind you need in order to stay on task.