

Successfully Delegating Written Projects

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YOU ARE SWAMPED with several pressing assignments, and a partner (or someone senior to you) gives you an assignment: to research and write a memo recommending a course of action. You are responsible for getting this done in an acceptable manner and in a timely fashion. There are junior associates (or subordinates) who have worked on this matter in the past. Do you do the assignment or delegate it? As much as you'd like to get it off your plate, you think that none of them will produce the same quality of work you do. Plus, it will be easier and less time-consuming for you to do it than it would be to meet with the associate, explain the assignment, review, edit, and revise the memo (with the likelihood that you will have to completely re-do it anyway).

If you are a perfectionist, you probably will redo it. And, if you have ADHD, the amount of energy that you have to put into figuring out how to communicate the assignment just seems too taxing to be worth it. It's worth it. The ability to delegate is essential for career advancement.

Maybe you just feel bad about "dumping" work on an associate that you don't want to do because it's boring, tedious, or just something you're not good at. Look at it from the associate's point of view. It



Editor's note: This article presents a unique combination of "senior professional" lived experience and valuable tips for assigning work to junior staff. While written from the author's perspective as a lawyer with ADHD, her experiences with delegating projects and the ideas she shares can be applied to many other environments and situations.

could be an opportunity to do something new, to get more billable hours, to get exposure to another partner, or it might be interesting to them. Just because you are responsible for a timely work product does not mean you have to do it yourself.

For lawyers with ADHD, there are at least three good reasons to delegate research and writing to others. First, it frees you up to do other things on your docket which in turn can help you deal with that feeling of being overwhelmed. You may be feeling overwhelmed because you do have too much to do. Second, delegation is a way to deal with tasks that you dislike or don't do well. Third, it's an opportunity to help develop other staff. The last point may be the most important.

If you regard delegation as your opportunity to help develop and empower another person professionally, you will approach it in a better way. Think of it as a long-term investment in another person. As they develop professionally, you can delegate more to them, freeing you to do the higher level tasks where you truly excel and add value.

Perfectionism gets in the way of delegating. And, if you have ADHD, that contributes to the problems related to how the ADHD brain operates. People with ADHD engage in all-or-nothing thinking. It has to be perfect or it has no value. We struggle to calibrate what is excellent or acceptable but not perfect. We see the work of colleagues and know the quality of our work is better. Sometimes we even wonder how they could hand in such an inferior product.

Step back for a minute. Are the partners accepting that work product? Does that person meet their deadlines? Is that person getting more assignments because they are "reliable"? If the answers are yes, it may be that that person has figured out what an "acceptable" or "excellent" level of performance looks like. But, you say, the partners tell you that they like your work product better—if you could just get it done timely. That path takes you to a life where you work endlessly, striving for perfection, working countless hours and then having to write them off because the client won't pay for the time it takes to achieve perfection. Here are some steps you can take to delegate successfully and get yourself out of that rut.

Pause and carefully consider the assignment

You are about to give someone a writing assignment. Before you do it, stop and think about exactly what the assignment is and what your expectations are. Try to be specific or to narrow the topic and have a conversation with the associate about the project. For instance, asking someone to write about air pollution in Salt Lake City is too broad of a topic and likely to overwhelm the writer. Instead, narrow the focus.

John C. Bean, in his book *Engaging Ideas*, recommends presenting the topic as a problem or research question. Problems are interesting to both neurotypicals and neuroatypicals. The ADHD brain, in particular, can engage in problem solving. The idea is to challenge the associate with problems that will challenge them to grapple with ideas and empower them to come up with new and

well-thought-out solutions.

If approached from the perspective of helping to develop less experienced attorneys, the delegator's role is to help subordinates develop the skills to communicate the results of their critical thinking. The reward for the delegator is that they work themselves out of the job of rewriting the work product of others.

Begin by having a conversation about the assignment

Topics that should be discussed with the person writing the memo should include:

- Why are we writing this?
- What is the goal?
- Who is the audience? And, what does the reader need to know?
- What do we want the reader to do?

We need to begin the writing process by thinking about where we want to end up. The conversation should end when the writer has a clear understanding of what the final work product should be able to do. Things like length, deadlines, local court rules, and so forth should also be clearly communicated.

Writing is a process

Build talk time into the writing process. Setting expectations early is the best way to ensure success. Establish a reporting schedule, which can either be dates or at set intervals. When you make the initial assignment, set a short date to meet with the associate to discuss their preliminary research and what their thoughts are about how to approach the problem.

Encourage the associate to talk about their ideas with you and with their colleagues to bounce ideas around, to test arguments, to get reactions from others and get feedback. The meeting is an opportunity for you to provide direction and if the associate is off-track to catch it early on.

Ask for a summary that describes the problem or issues that will be addressed and the direction they intend to take before they sit down to write it in full. Set a word limit between 200 to 500 words or a page limit or you will be reading long-winded drafts. This is your opportunity to catch a wrong approach before it's too late. You are not looking for fully developed arguments and you are not editing. This is a review of substance not grammar or style.

If the summary is acceptable, set a date for when they will give you the outline or first draft. By setting these interim dates you are breaking the project into chunks that will, at the very least, prevent the entire project from being a last-minute endeavor. It also helps you as the delegator to manage your anxiety by staying informed as the project progresses.

If time allows, you want to see a draft before they finalize the project. The expectation is that they have edited the writing before they give it to you. That means, they have done spell and grammar checks, word substitutions, and other tinkering. Bean suggests that writers do their final read-through on a paper copy.

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Some people find reading it out loud to be helpful. It is a great way to find those missing words or things that don't sound right.

For large projects, there should be no more than three or four touchpoints: when you give the original assignment; a conversation before they start writing to discuss preliminary research and approach; review of executive summary so that you understand the major arguments and direction of the memo, and then finally a final draft. This should all be communicated when the assignment is given so that the associate knows what is expected of them and that you will be involved and present to assist as needed.

When you edit, be clear on which edits are required and which are suggestions. Resist that temptation to review multiple times. The people you work with are professionals. It is their responsibility to make the required revisions and to use their best judgment on whether or not to accept your suggestions.

Your role as reviewer

Your role should be to make sure it's substantively correct, suggest further areas of discovery/research/argument; further development of ideas, or modification of ideas. Your role is NOT to research, rewrite, or reorganize the project. If the research isn't adequate, point out the problem. If the writing isn't clear, explain what you don't understand and ask them to clarify. And if you think the arguments need to be organized differently, say that and explain why, but don't do it yourself.

Bean recommends that reviewers make revision-oriented comments on written work product, which "largely ignores sentence errors and concentrates on ideas and structure with the aim of

evoking a revised draft exhibiting greater complexity and sophistication of thought... The editing-oriented philosophy (grammar errors) sends the message that the [writer] mainly needs to correct errors (even though the draft, if perfectly edited, would be weak in ideas and structure.). The revision-oriented philosophy sends the message that the current draft needs to be dismantled and the ideas thought through again. Note, too that the revision-oriented philosophy takes the writer's ideas seriously and finds something to praise." If you start with the positive, it will open the associate to hearing the critical feedback.

When you have a final product, remember to thank the associate, acknowledge their hard work and professional growth, and provide appropriate praise. 🗣️



Rosemary Hollinger, JD, ACC, is the founder of Partner Up LLC and a certified ADHD coach. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center and practiced law for over thirty years in various capacities including legal aid attorney, law firm associate, and finally as an attorney and manager for the US government. Hollinger started at the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission as a trial attorney and eventually served as a deputy director in the Division of Enforcement and as the Chicago Regional Administrator. She currently represents asylum seekers through the ABA Immigration Justice Project. She has taught the National Institute of Trial Advocacy Deposition and Trial Advocacy programs for over twenty years and at DePaul University Law School. More recently, she completed the training at ADDCA to become certified as an ADHD coach. She specializes in coaching lawyers with executive function challenges or ADHD. Hollinger would like to acknowledge the book *Engaging Ideas* by John C. Bean as the source for many of the ideas she shares on delegating.