

"You want to know how you make money at this?" he told me point-blank a few days after I'd started. "Well, it isn't by being some great fucking lawyer." He had made partner in six years, a meteoric rise almost unheard of in any firm today. They couldn't not make him partner. He brought in more clients than most of the senior partners, enough that the firm had to push an older partner out of my group and give it to him. And everybody knew that was just a stepping-stone. Larry was the sort of animal who'd eventually run the firm. Or start his own. He wasn't working for anybody but himself. "I got ahead because I brought in business," I remember him deadpanning. "That's all that matters."

A lot of lawyers would argue with Larry. They'd say there's still a place at the top for the best legal minds, and in a hyper-technical sense, they would be correct. If you're the Einstein or Mozart of your specialty, there's always space at the summit. For everyone else, however, law's a lace-curtain version of the accounting and consulting industries, a pyramid where the few rainmakers sit at the top and the masses of fungible labor toil underneath, most of them maximizing billable hours for canned, cookie-cutter work, a pack of factory schleps on a French-cuffed assembly line. In that world it isn't about winning or losing. It's about getting paid. Billable hours aren't important—they're everything, which Larry made abundantly clear at every department meeting:

"I want everyone sending regular status update letters to clients. Tell them something about their cases. I know those are small-time entries, but they add up." "Keep your time sheet next to you when you read the mail. Every letter's a '1' or '2.' Those '1s' and '2s' add up at the end of the month." "Bill every minute you can. Bill the time you were thinking about the case in the shower. Every moment you're thinking about the case is billable time."

Once a week the department would get together and Larry or his lieutenant, Charles Haskell, would analyze the hours billed up to that point in the month. Underperformers got the same speech every week. "We need you to bill as close as you can to two hundred hours a month. If you want a bonus, we expect that effort." If

someone complained, the response was always the same—"If you don't like billing your time, go to a plaintiff's firm."

2,400 hours a year. Sounds innocent enough, right? Those are just numbers to the layman, so let me explain what "2,400 hours" means. Assuming two weeks' vacation, 2,400 hours a year translates to 48 billable hours a week, or 9.6 hours per workday. If you spent 12 hours a day in the office—from 9 A.M. until 9 P.M.—and took one hour for lunch, you would have to actually work—*providing a real billable benefit to your client*—53 minutes of each of the remaining 11 hours. This allows you 7 minutes of every hour to:

1. Surf the Internet
2. Talk to coworkers
3. Use the bathroom
4. Get coffee
5. Take and make personal phone calls
6. Balance your checkbook
7. Check your investments
8. Run to the café downstairs to get a Diet Coke
9. Send and receive personal emails
10. Actually read the lame jokes people send you

If you did what most lawyers do—scan the news online every forty-five minutes and read the legal trade paper for half an hour in the morning—you'd have already wasted close to half of your allotted free time for the day.* At the time, I knew lawyers billing 200–230 hours a *month*, and there were legends circulating about people billing 2,700 to 3,000 hours a year at some firms. I could only assume these were the lawyers who didn't have the Internet on their computers and kept piss pots next to their desks.