

The 10-Min. Rule For Building A Business Development Habit

By **Paul Manuele** (April 28, 2025)

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."[1]

That line is historian Will Durant's summary of a core idea in Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics": that happiness[2] is achieved through repeated acts of excellence.[3] We don't begin with excellence and then behave accordingly. We build excellence by doing the right things consistently — until they become part of who we are.



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The idea that excellence is achieved gradually through repeated action feels out of sync with our culture, which is increasingly shaped by Silicon Valley's seeming obsession with disruption. "Move fast and break things," Mark Zuckerberg famously said.[4]

And now, Elon Musk is applying that ethos to the federal government in his role as head of the Department of Government Efficiency, where he has overseen sweeping agency cuts. In late March, he described these actions as "the biggest revolution in government since the original revolution." [5]

The question is, do we really need a revolution? Our culture celebrates dramatic moves, but more often than not, improvement comes from incremental and deliberate steps. It comes from showing up, following up and doing unglamorous things — consistently, thoughtfully and without fanfare. That's how relationships are built. That's how trust is earned. And nowhere is that truer than in legal business development.

Some lawyers seem naturally wired for business development. They maintain broad networks, strike up conversations easily and always seem to stay visible in the right ways. But none of that is innate. Even the most natural rainmakers built those habits over time, often without realizing it, through repeated and intentional effort.

If business development doesn't feel natural to you, that's OK — practice can make it so. You become a rainmaker by doing what rainmakers do, until it becomes second nature.[6]

This is where a lot of people hesitate. They assume that building strong business development habits requires a significant investment of time and effort[7] — and that it might even require them to become someone they're not. But that's a misunderstanding. You don't need to adopt a false persona. You grow into a deeper version of yourself through intentional action. And often, that growth begins with something small.

The 10-Minute Rule

Years ago, I started playing piano as a way to support my daughter, who has special needs. I had signed her up for lessons at a local music school in Queens, New York, and I wanted to help her practice at home. The only problem was, I didn't know how to play piano either. So I started learning — just enough to guide her through the basics.

Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with the instrument and started thinking about

playing myself. But I had a long commute, a demanding job and barely enough time for sleep, let alone a new hobby.

One evening at a parent night, the school's founder, pianist Martin Söderbergh,[8] offered a piece of advice I didn't expect: "If you only have 10 minutes, just play for 10 minutes." I waited for the rest — some follow-up like "and then 10 will turn into 15, and 15 will turn into 30." But it never came. He stopped at 10 minutes. Here was a world-class musician telling me that 10 minutes is enough.

So, I started practicing. That was 11 years ago, and I'm still at it. A lot of days, I really do play for only 10 minutes. But I keep showing up. And that's all a habit really needs to take root. I'm a pianist today not because I carved out a huge block of time, but because I didn't wait for one.

That lesson applies to business development, too, which many lawyers avoid because they believe they need a plan, a script or hours of time. But just like practicing an instrument, you can build momentum with small, consistent actions. One thoughtful outreach a day — an email, a phone call, a walk to a colleague's office — can be enough to start a habit.

You don't need a client relationship management system or a pipeline dashboard. You don't need to scale anything. You just need to connect with one person at a time, with care and consistency.

Four Business Development Practice Tips

Here are four ways to make your business development practice more effective — starting with whatever time you have today.

1. Make the outreach personal.

There are plenty of reasons to reach out to someone — and they don't have to be groundbreaking. A client alert that could affect their business might be worth flagging, especially if there's a less obvious angle or implication readers might miss from the headline alone.

Or maybe a colleague was speaking with you about a continuing legal education session that her team is presenting to select clients. You might send a quick note to potential clients saying something like:

Our data privacy and cybersecurity group is presenting a CLE to select clients on AI and legal risk. Based on our last conversation, I thought a few of the takeaways might be especially relevant to you and your team. Happy to connect and explore whether we could bring a version of it to your group.

You don't need a perfect pretext. The best outreach reflects a genuine connection and simply shows that you're paying attention. A short, congratulatory note in response to a promotion, a panel appearance or an article shared on LinkedIn can be more than enough: "Saw your announcement — congrats! Would love to catch up if you have time this month."

2. Keep track of conversations.

If your firm has a client relationship management system and expects you to log contact activity, you should. A quick note about who you spoke to and what the conversation

covered, at a high level, helps your colleagues avoid missteps and enables the firm to coordinate outreach.

But you should also keep a separate, personal document where you log the specifics that help you continue the conversation, including what the person said; what they cared about; any personal information they shared, such as children's names and ages; and what you promised to follow up on. These are the details that make your next conversation feel like a natural continuation, not a cold restart.

You can do this in a Word or Excel document. Some lawyers prefer Excel for its structure and sorting capabilities; others like Word for its narrative feel. Choose whatever you'll use. I use Excel in this format:

First Name	Last Name	Title	Email	Company	Office Phone	Mobile	Notes	LinkedIn?
Sarah	Klein	Deputy GC	skein@abc.com	ABC Co.	555-555-555		1/31: Zoom with Sarah ... 1/23: Met Sarah at legal innovation roundtable ...	Y

I log interactions in reverse chronological order in the "Notes" field so I don't need to dig to find the current status. Using this approach, your notes entries might look like this:

- 1/31: Zoom with Sarah. She asked for bullet points describing the CLE that she can forward to David. Sent as requested. Her daughter, Emma, is a freshman at Northeastern, premed, excited but still getting used to Boston winters.
- 1/23: Met Sarah at legal innovation roundtable. GC at her company, David Lin, is concerned about AI-related enforcement. Forwarded AI regulatory enforcement trends client alert to her and mentioned CLE that the data privacy and cybersecurity group is offering select clients; suggested we meet on Zoom.

3. Be clear about what you do.

You may have a broad skill set. You may take on a wide range of matters. But people can't refer work if they can't remember what you do. And many can't — not because they don't respect you, but because they're busy, distracted or never quite understood your focus in the first place.

That's why the clarity of your message matters, and why branding is an integral part of business development. People cannot hire you or refer work your way if they don't understand what you do and how you can help. It's essential to get clear in your own mind about how you describe your practice. What kind of work are you best at? What do you want more of? What kinds of problems do you help people solve?

Most people in your network probably don't think about you often. And when they do, they may not have a very clear impression of your role. Give them a description that's simple and specific enough to remember. For example, you might say something like, "I'm a trial lawyer who helps companies navigate complex commercial disputes — especially ones they can't afford to lose."

4. Play the long game.

My piano experience illustrates how small changes in behavior can be transformational, especially when sustained over time. And there are many other examples. Think of how

relatively small but regular contributions to a 401(k) account can build significant wealth over the course of a 30-year career, or how modest changes in dietary and exercise habits can promote health and well-being.

The same is true for business development. You don't need big gestures or sweeping strategies. You need a habit. Daily, intentional actions that may seem minor in the moment — checking in with a contact, making a quick note about a conversation, offering a helpful introduction — can compound over time in ways that are transformative.

Putting It Into Practice

I remember learning my first simple piano piece.[9] After I had played it through once, my teacher asked me to turn the music around and try to play it from memory. I contended that I had never tried doing that before, and seriously doubted that I could.

And then, to my great astonishment, I did it.

"Now you're a pianist," he said.

If you don't feel like a rainmaker right now, that doesn't mean you don't have the potential to become one. But you do have to practice in order to actualize your potential.

Business development doesn't require you to transform overnight or become someone you're not. It requires only a commitment to keep showing up — one outreach a day, a few minutes of follow-up.

If you stick with it, you will get into the habit. And one day, you may find yourself doing what once felt impossible.

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[1] The Story of Philosophy, Will Durant, Ch. 2, §VII.

[2] Aristotle uses the term eudaimonia to describe the ultimate goal of human life—often translated as "happiness," though it connotes flourishing or living well. It refers not to a fleeting emotion but to a state of fulfillment achieved through the active expression of one's highest capabilities.

[3] The Greek word aretê is commonly translated as "virtue" but is more precisely rendered as "excellence" understood as the full realization of one's capacity or function. It implies the ability to perform well in accordance with reason, developed through practice and discipline.

[4] <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/move-fast-and-break-things>.

[5] Fox News, March 27, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCtt4qR18bs>. There is, of course, a meaningful difference between breaking things in tech and breaking things in a

democracy.

[6] Many lawyers who struggle with business development had no trouble building relationships as children. They made friends easily and ran with the neighborhood kids. The trouble is not who they are but how they see themselves in a professional context. If you've internalized the belief that you're not a "people person," that story is worth questioning. It might not be true. Or it might only be true in certain settings. Either way, it's worth investigating, because relationship-building is a skill, not a fixed trait, and much of it can be learned (or re-learned) through practice.

[7] Malcom Gladwell popularized the idea that it takes 10,000 hours to master a skill (*Outliers*, Ch. 2), citing the Beatles' marathon apprenticeship playing clubs in Hamburg, Germany, and Bill Gates' long hours in a computer lab as a teenager. His larger point was that success is a function not only of hard work but also timing and opportunity. The 10,000-hour requirement, though necessary, is not sufficient and applies to world-class mastery, not professional competence.

[8] Martin Söderberg is a Manhattan School of Music-trained classical pianist and founder of Cadenza Music School in Queens, New York. He has performed at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall and Carnegie's Weill Hall, recorded seven albums—including *Piano Music from Spain*, *The 24 Chopin Etudes*, and a four-volume set of *Piano Music from Latin America*—and appeared as a guest soloist with orchestras around the world under internationally respected conductors such as Zdeněk Košler and Irwin Hoffmann. His performances focus on interpreting and bringing wider recognition to the works of Latin American composers.

[9] *Fanfare*, Op. 117, No. 8, Cornelius Gurlitt, in *Returning to the Piano: A Refresher Book for Adults* by Wendy Stevens (Hal Leonard, 2010).