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A little time can bring big rewards

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QUILL TOOLBOX

Career

Learn more about the Pareto Principle:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle

A little time can bring big rewards

Academic fraud in the men's basketball program. The unseen world of cancer survivors. Limited ambulance service in low-income areas.

The topics can be explored in Anytown USA. And they'll give readers information that illuminates the world around them.

And guess what? They're the stuff of Pulitzers — really.

In 2000, George Dohrmann of the St. Paul Pioneer Press won a Pulitzer for beat reporting when he uncovered academic fraud within the University of Minnesota's men's basketball program. In 2005, Amy Dockser Marcus of the Wall Street Journal won a beat-reporting Pulitzer for her stories about patients, families and physicians facing cancer. And, in 1971, William Jones of the Chicago Tribune won a Pulitzer for local investigative specialized reporting for exposing problems with ambulance service.

As a reporter, you might say, "I don't have the time or the freedom to explore a topic like that." As an editor, you might think, "My staff has many other things to do."

The key is to make time for the stories that improve the lives of those we serve. Yes, a Pulitzer would be nice, but that shouldn't be the reason for the investment.

If your newspaper or station wants to elevate journalism, believe you can do it and set your mind to it. How do you do it? The same way you eat an elephant: a small piece at a time.

Using the Pareto Principle, or the 80-20 rule, might make a difference in how you work. The Pareto Principle basically says that 80 percent of the result comes from 20 percent of the efforts. So, if you focused on how to use 20 percent of your time on the results you wanted, say better journalism, you could improve the quality of journalism.

That's 12 minutes of every hour or 96 minutes in an eight-hour day. You could use that time building your skills as an investigative journalist.

Here are some ideas to use 12 minutes:

- Join Society of Professional Journalists or Investigative Reporters and Editors so you can learn techniques and gain fresh ideas about what is being done elsewhere in the industry.
- Call one of your sources who made an interesting comment about a failure in society. Use the 12 minutes to make an appointment and get some preliminary information so you'll be prepared for a longer conversation on another day.
- Get a copy of a general letter you could use to fashion a Freedom of Information request to an agency you cover.
- Tailor a request and send that letter to an agency that has a public record you want.
- Create a filing system that helps you keep track of your FOI requests. Include the topic you want to explore; the record you requested; the date you filed it; the person you spoke with or sent the information to; the response you received; and a follow-up date.
- Talk with a colleague in your newsroom or in another newsroom that wrote an interesting story that used public records.
- Visit a Web site for a list of award finalists and winners and pick a topic that interests you and find out where you can get a copy of the story or stories. Those sites might be those that list winners of the Sigma Delta Chi Awards, Pulitzer, Investigative Reporters and Editors, Edward R. Murrow or any other awards for journalism excellence.

Here are some ideas for spending 96 minutes:

- Figure out how to do an FOI audit by using the information on the SPJ Web site (www.spj.org/foitoolkit.asp).
- Read a few tip sheets on the Investigative Reporters and Editors Web site and create a plan on how to methodically get records.
- Brainstorm with newsroom colleagues — photographers, copy editors, assignment editors, reporters, writers, producers, anchors — about worthwhile projects that should be done in your community.
- Host a brown-bag session on how to create FOI requests or what legal rights you have to public information in your state.
- Read, view or listen to the pieces that won awards for journalism excellence.

You don't have to win some great honor, but mastering the Pareto Principle could help you manage your time effectively and improve the quality of the journalism we do. ❖

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