

Advice for Attorneys Starting Their First "Real" Law Firm Job

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The Legal Intelligencer

April 3, 2014

The February Bar has recently concluded, and exam takers will soon find out their results. Those fortunate to have passed the exam will likely be pounding the pavement in search of employment. For many of these individuals, the job they land as a newly minted lawyer will not be their first. Each law school graduating class includes professionals from various and diverse industries who decided to attend law school after already holding a full-time job. The police officer who frequently testifies at criminal trials studied to become a district attorney. The entrepreneur who has developed apps and started a business desired to understand corporate law. A CPA with a penchant for estate planning sought education in state and federal tax law.

These individuals with past industry work experience often have a leg-up over young law school grads just starting out on their legal career. A first-year attorney who has yet to hold a full-time job before passing the bar lacks the advantage that having professional work experience provides. Gaining meaningful work experience as a full-time student for four years of undergraduate school and then three years of law school can be challenging. In addition to learning all the nuances to being a practicing attorney—a never-ending pursuit in itself—this young lawyer must determine how to effectively operate in a professional environment.

Coming from the perspective of a first-year attorney who entered the workforce straight from law school, this article will provide advice for young attorneys and future attorneys who have followed the same path. Recognizing that there are many different kinds of jobs within the legal market, this article specifically speaks to those young attorneys who are starting a job at a law firm.

Take an Active Approach to Your Cases

In all likelihood, as a first year attorney you will not immediately be assigned with your own caseload. If you're like me, you will be put on a team and assigned work by the attorney in charge of the case. Even though your work on the case may be fragmented, it is important to understand all the facts and form your own independent legal opinions. Act as if the case is your own, so that when you are completing tasks such as reviewing documents, answering discovery, or conducting legal research you are always asking, what does this have to do with proceeding forward in this litigation? How is this work helping the ultimate disposition of this case? If and when the supervising attorney ever asks for your conclusion on a particular issue, you should be prepared with a well-reasoned answer.

Always Be Listening

Even though it is essential to always be ready with an answer if needed, it is not necessarily important to always voice your opinions on a particular matter. While you may be working on a case for months, and you truly believe that you have a thorough understanding of the facts and a sound analysis of the law, it is highly unlikely that you have considered all the facets and complexities implicit to the case, no matter how apparent they might seem. As such, it is of the utmost importance to constantly listen to senior attorneys when they are discussing the matter. Be alert to how these seasoned practitioners analyze a case from its infancy stages, through discovery, up to the time of trial. What questions are they consistently asking? How do they organize their arguments? By remaining perceptive of how others operate, you can learn key stylistic points to incorporate into the way you practice.

Work to Earn the Trust of Your Peers

Learning how to be an effective practitioner does not happen overnight. One of the best ways to become a good lawyer is by working with and for other good lawyers. However, before you will be assigned meaningful work, you must gain the trust of these well-respected attorneys. This is a process that can take some time, but building and cultivating these relationships is essential.

One way to accomplish this is by always making yourself available. As a first year attorney your primary job is to assist those who are above you. This means everyone. Obviously, your overriding priority is the attorney or attorneys to whom you are assigned, and in no way and at no time should the quality of your work product for them suffer, but this does not mean you should not be available to other senior attorneys who may be looking for your help. In fact, you should try to *always* be available, for any and all tasks, even when they're not legally related or billable. This helps to build your social equity within your firm, and is an excellent way to gain the trust of your superiors.

Utilize Your Assistant

If you are lucky enough to have an administrative assistant, make sure you utilize his or her talents to the fullest potential. In all probability your assistant has been working at the firm much longer than you have and knows more about the actual practice of law. As such, this person is an invaluable resource. From having knowledge of the local rules of a specific jurisdiction to providing valuable insight into the “do's and don'ts” around the office, your assistant can provide a wealth of helpful insight,

making him or her an essential figure in your professional development.

One way to establish and cultivate this relationship is by simply taking the time to have a conversation. Get to know who this person is. Show interest in areas of his or her life outside of work. Make sure you relate the same about yourself. This will build a relationship of mutual respect. Having a good working relationship with your assistant will certainly ease your own burdens and, in all likelihood, end up saving you from making an inadvertent mistake at some point along the way.

Now I do not profess to be reiterating these lessons entirely from my own legal experience. I have been fortunate in the fact that many people have taken an interest and aided the development of my legal career, and for that I am grateful. In some way, shape, or form, all of these lessons have been offered to me by those senior attorneys who I try to emulate in my practice. However, I have found that incorporating these simple points into my daily routine has helped me to become a little better at practicing law each day, than I was the day before.



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