

A Few Tips on How to Succeed as an Associate

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Law school teaches students about the history of the law, the critical thinking skills necessary to analyze issues and the foundation of our legal system. However, critics of the law school curriculum note that the program does not always teach new attorneys the nuances of how to practice law. So when new law school graduates join law firms, they are not always ready to hit the ground running.

Some law students, even those at the top of their class, feel lost once practice begins, particularly if they begin their careers in a jurisdiction where knowledge of local practice is paramount. Although law firms often invest significant resources into training new associates, associates can still sometimes feel overwhelmed by the expectations, particularly given the stark differences between law school life and life as a junior associate in a law firm. Here are some tips for recent law school graduates to help develop a successful career in private practice.

For most junior associates, having one's own clients is a prospect that is years away. However, that does not mean there's nothing associates can do in the meantime to get started on the right path. Indeed, many successful law firm partners built their practices from the bottom up, with the skills and relationships developed as junior lawyers as the foundation.

Of course, junior attorneys can develop relationships with peers—whether from law school or elsewhere—who may someday be potential clients. And, getting involved in the bar, the firm, an alumni group or the community can help develop a reputation that can be expanded upon when the associate is in a position to put together his or her own book of business. At the outset, however, development of core skills is one of the best things that junior lawyers can do to ensure later business development.

For most associates, work and opportunity comes from the partners on their own team. By taking steps to make themselves indispensable to those people, associates can ensure that those partners will never want to work without them, which also helps associates create job security for themselves. Another benefit of that approach is that there can be opportunities for junior associates to work directly with more senior colleagues' clients, where the junior associate has demonstrated his or her value. Because a partner's relationship with a client may be the result of several years of work, the partner may be wary of introducing the client to an associate who may not meet expectations. Thus, until associates have clients of their own, treating the partner they work for like a client can be a strong path to success. Being responsive, timely with work product, and personable are traits that may lead a partner to trust associates with that partner's client relationships.

From time to time, ethical issues may arise that create challenges to the practice of law. It can be helpful for associates to familiarize themselves with the rules upon beginning practice to help associates ensure that they are acting ethically. Indeed, all attorneys at all levels have an obligation to ensure compliance with the Rules of Professional Conduct. If a junior associate has concerns about whether he or she is being asked to violate a rule of professional conduct or if he or she is otherwise facing an ethical dilemma, one option is to ask questions and seek help, whether from in-house counsel, a mentor or some other person who handles issues of risk. Law school may not always prepare junior associates to respond to real-life ethical dilemmas, so junior associates do not need to be afraid to ask for help.

At its core, law firm economics are quite simple—revenues, in the form of fees received for billable hours, must exceed costs, namely salaries and other expenses. Thus, a law firm's ability to meet its financial goals is often predicated on associates meeting their billable hour expectations and working efficiently. The practice of law can be a demanding profession, but it can be helpful for junior associates to keep in mind that the success of the law firm can be impacted by whether the associates keep up with their assignments or devote too much time to nonbillable efforts.

Learning best practices and receiving constructive criticism from supervisors can help associates increase their individual profitability, which is a potential indicator of long-term success.