

LawPracticeTODAY

Surviving Your "Junioring" Years

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Being an associate is not easy, particularly in your first year or two of practice. Law School and the Bar Admission Course provide you with limited preparation, expectations are high and the demands are great. While the learning curve is steep, and some growing pains are inevitable, the following guidelines should make your experience more enjoyable and more successful.

1. Work Hard

This surely goes without saying, but hard work is the cornerstone of any associate's success. Do not think you are doing anything particularly novel if you work evenings and weekends. While the quality of your work is surely more important than the quantity (see number 3 below), the number of hours worked will never be overlooked by your employer.

2. Take Initiative

Sitting back, doing only what is asked of you and generally "flying under the radar" may help you manage your time, but it is not going to advance your career. You need to take some initiative to get the experience you'll need to be successful in future years. For example, in a litigation practice, you may research the law for a motion, prepare an Affidavit of Documents before a discovery, or draft a pre-trial or mediation memorandum. You will doubtless be familiar with the file, but this knowledge is somewhat wasted if you do not also attend on the motion, discovery, mediation or pre-trial. While your supervising lawyer should try to get you involved in these events, he or she will not always think of it, and it is up to you to ask. Sometimes it won't be possible due to scheduling conflicts, other commitments, etc., but take every opportunity to assist more experienced counsel at significant file events. You may be able to do something substantive, or your role may be strictly as a spectator. Either way, you will benefit from experiencing the "big picture," and you will be better prepared to handle these events on your own when the time comes.

3. Stress Quality Over Quantity

As a junior lawyer, it will take you longer than a more experienced colleague to complete any given task. Accept that fact, recognize that it will mean that you will be putting in more hours than your more experienced colleagues (see number 1 above), and ensure that the work you do is of good quality regardless of how long it takes. If your supervising lawyer has a choice of you spending two hours on a task and performing it well, or spending one hour and having it full of errors and in need of major revision, which do you think he or she will prefer?

4. Be Realistic About What You Can Achieve

While initiative is good, it is also important to be realistic. You always want to appear eager to help, and never want to say "no" for fear of appearing lazy, unmotivated, etc. However, if you are taking on work that you cannot complete, you are ultimately doing a disservice to both the firm and yourself.

5. Move Your Cases Forward

This point cannot be overemphasized. It is easy to keep busy, but there is a big difference between doing enough to fill your day, and doing constructive work that helps push cases forward to conclusion. Remember that clients are looking for results and they want them quickly. Obviously, depending on the nature of your practice, it can reasonably take months or even years to achieve those results, which most clients understand and accept. What is unacceptable, and often leads to both subpar results and unhappy clients, is the delay that could have been avoided. To ensure that your work is being completed in a timely manner, create and continuously update a file (or assignment) list, review it regularly, and, most importantly, ensure that every time you work on a file, you do something constructive to move that file forward. What you want to avoid is the situation where you review a file and then, for whatever reason, that file goes back on the shelf without any other action. If you are unsure about what to do next, ask someone. If you become distracted by another matter, ensure that you come back to the file in the immediate future, before time passes and everything must be reviewed again. Not only is it beneficial to your firm to have cases moved forward, unnecessary delay causes nothing but prejudice to the client, who will eventually become exasperated, first with the process and then with you.

6. Be a Team Player

Everyone wants to receive credit, especially in a competitive environment like a legal practice. But you will do far better in the long run if you are known as a team player. Don't look for personal "reward," go out of your way to accommodate those you work with, help your colleagues whenever you can, and always give others credit for their involvement, however small, in an assignment of yours. Your good work, humility, and "team" approach will all be noticed. On the other hand, your work product may be overshadowed if you develop a reputation of being interested only in promoting yourself.

7. Accept The "Joe" Jobs With A Smile

As a junior lawyer, you will inevitably get some assignments that have made their way to you because no one wants them and everyone above you has managed to avoid them. It's not always fair, and sometimes the product of nothing more than laziness on the part of more senior counsel, but it is going to happen. Just keep smiling. The lawyer who assigned you this task probably knows it is a "dog" (even if he or she won't admit it) and you will be

appreciated for getting it done. Do these (and your other assignments) well, and soon your superiors will find someone else to do these unenviable tasks.

8. Do Not Be Afraid To Ask For Help

Your supervising lawyer should have an "open door" policy, and you should feel welcome to ask questions. It's part of the learning process and helps ensure that you stay "on track." There are two caveats. First, you have to be familiar with the file you are asking about - it is not your superior's job to brief you about background matters you could learn on your own. Second, you must have already made a reasonable effort to find the answer. You will be quite embarrassed if the answer to your question is easily found in the first place you should have looked (procedural details found in the Rules of Civil Procedure are a prime example). If you have done both these things, feel free to ask.

9. Be Nice To Your Staff

Good office staff is a valuable resource. Good staff makes your practice easier and more successful, while less worthy staff will have just the opposite effect. This is particularly true for junior lawyers who will benefit from the experience of secretaries and law clerks, some of whom have been in the industry for many years. Most junior lawyers have never had staff working for them before, and there can be a tendency to treat staff as subservient, or otherwise with a lack of respect. This is a serious mistake! Consider your staff to be valuable members of your team and treat them accordingly. You will find that the quality of their work will be higher, and their motivation to help you during those inevitable emergencies will be greater. Treat your staff with disdain, and , you can figure out the rest.

10. Confront Your Mistakes and Accept Constructive Criticism

While nobody wants to make a mistake, it is going to happen. None of us is perfect. When something has gone wrong, whether the error is big or small, deal with it immediately! Do not bury the problem and hope that it will go away. It won't. If you confront the mistake immediately, there may still be a way to fix or at least minimize the problem. By trying to hide from it, you can rest assured that when you are ultimately required to confront the issue (and you will be) the problem will be much greater. Your delay may even prejudice your insurance coverage in some situations. One of the inevitable consequences of making an error is that you will receive criticism, hopefully of the constructive variety. Listen to what you are being told, and learn what is expected of you so you can avoid making the same mistake again. As long as your error was not the result of laziness or total carelessness, don't be embarrassed or focus on it endlessly. Your superiors made plenty of mistakes too, perhaps the same ones you have made. Above all else, don't argue or get defensive - accept the fact that you made a mistake, fix it (if you can) and move on.

11. Keep Learning

Whatever your practice area, the law is complex and constantly developing. Make sure that you take the time to read the legal literature available to you, which should always include weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines, and seminar materials relevant to your area of practice. It is your obligation to keep up to date on changes in the law, and you will be very happy to avoid uncomfortable situations that can arise from not doing so.

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