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Keys to success for attorneys new to the profession

By Joshua J. Burress

This article is for newly minted attorneys and associates in their first few years of practice. If you're in either of these categories, I strongly encourage you to read on for several fundamental keys to success that, in my opinion, every new attorney should embrace. The advice



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outlined below reflects mistakes I've made, mistakes I've seen others make and guidance that, as a new attorney seven years ago, I wish I would have had. I can tell you for certain the last thing I was doing as a new attorney was scouring news articles for "associate success tips," but if you're reading this, you're well on your way to a significant head start.

Embrace the fact that you're learning how to swim

It doesn't matter how hard you studied in law school, or how much experience you gained through externships or summer associate programs — you will quickly realize that your real legal education is only just beginning. No one emerges from law school equipped with all the skills and knowledge required to competently practice law. We were all new once, and no one expects you to know everything. In fact, aside from legal research and memo drafting, much of what you'll do for the next several years will likely be completely new to you.

When given a new assignment or project, always make sure you clearly understand it, as well as the assigning attorney's expectations. If you're asked to do something that is completely new to you (or that you don't have much experience with) don't hesitate to ask questions. We don't expect you to know everything, but we do expect you to let us know if you need additional guidance or help. For example, if the assigning attorney asks you to draft something that you've never prepared before, such as a set of discovery requests or an operating agreement, don't be afraid to ask for a sample document. The assigning attorney can likely (and should) direct you to some of his or her prior work product.

Time management is critical

Starting out, you'll have plenty of time to complete nonemergency assignments. But as you "ramp up," it will become increasingly important that you effectively manage your time. Until you get a feel for how long certain projects/tasks take, you'll need to rely on the assigning attorneys' estimates of how long projects should take to complete. However, even after you've gained experience, it is common for projects to take longer than initially anticipated. To avoid a bad outcome, there are a few things you should always do when taking on new assignments.

First, you should always ask the assigning attorney for a deadline. Taking into account any other active projects or upcoming deadlines you have at that time, you should then determine whether you can realistically satisfy the deadline. If the project is relatively complex, to be safe, you should assume that the project will take an additional two to four hours to complete.

Also keep in mind that as you dig into a project or begin conducting research, you may find that you have more questions or that additional tasks are needed. If you wait until the last minute to begin the project, there may not be sufficient time to complete it if something unexpected comes up.

On that note, if, after beginning a project, it appears to you that it will take significantly longer than the assigning attorney expected, you should communicate that to the assigning attorney and explain why you believe that to be the case.

Finally, if something unexpected happens that will or may prevent you from meeting a deadline, let the assigning attorney know ASAP. Blowing a deadline is one of the worst things you can do. Things happen, and life is full of unexpected events — we get that. If you communicate with the assigning attorney as soon as possible, there's a far better chance the project can be reassigned and completed on time.

Pay attention to detail

Whether it's catching typos in a draft email, correcting errors in a draft brief or picking up on a critical fact during a deposition, attention to detail is everything. For example, you should never send an email without reading it at least twice. Few things are more embarrassing than firing off a hasty email to a client that has a glaring typo, omits a referenced attachment or has an unintended recipient.

Likewise, you should never turn in work product to an assigning attorney that you haven't thoroughly reviewed. It is far better to be slow and good than it is to be quick and sloppy. Regardless of your practice area, attention to detail is a skill that should be continuously sharpened throughout your career.

Putting the pieces of the puzzle together

As noted above, most (if not all) of the substantive legal work you'll do before ascending to partnership will be completely new to you. As a new associate, you'll be assigned projects that are occurring at various stages of a lawsuit or transaction. Until you are able to play a significant role in a lawsuit or transaction from beginning to end, it will not always be clear where your particular task/assignment fits into the grand scheme of things. However, you should always be working toward putting the pieces of the puzzle together. One of the easiest ways to do that is to be inquisitive about your assignments. Most assigning attorneys will be more than happy to provide background information about your projects.

You should also try to take something away, or learn something, from each task/project you're given. One day you'll be the attorney handing out assignments. At some point you'll be expected to know what needs to be done, when it needs to be done and why it needs to be done. As you gain experience, it's critical that you understand the substance of what you're doing, its importance and where it fits in the grand scheme of things. Seeing the bigger picture will take time, but it will take even longer if you view incoming assignments as mere opportunities to meet your billing goals.

I hope you've found these tips helpful. I have no doubt that if you incorporate them into your practice, you will not only be much more likely to avoid the pitfalls to which new associates most frequently fall victim, you will be well on your way to becoming a successful attorney. •

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