

From the Career Files: A Dozen Suggestions for New Lawyers

Ed. note: This is the fourth installment in a new series of posts from the *ATL Career Center's* team of expert contributors. Today, we have some great advice for newly minted attorneys from *Joshua Stein*, the principal of *Joshua Stein PLLC*, a prominent commercial real estate law practice in Manhattan.

It's your first year as a new lawyer. What do you need to know? How can you not screw it up? Here are some suggestions, based on more than 30 years of experience — as an associate at two firms, then a brief time as an associate at a third firm, followed by 20+ years as a partner at that third firm. These suggestions reflect my own experiences, lessons learned along the way, and what I've seen and heard from others. Nothing here applies specifically or uniquely to any firm where I worked.



It's a Business. As much as we might all want law firms to be kind and gentle, remember that client demands are not kind and gentle. Also remember that a firm's profitability — the ultimate main event — depends on buying a lot of legal expertise wholesale, converting it into as many hours of billable legal work as possible, then selling those hours at retail. That isn't going to go away. Get used to it. That's the business you're in. If you don't want to be in it, go find some other business to be in.

Work Hard. Yes, of course you expect to be told to work hard. But you should work hard strategically. Be available for that horrible assignment from the assigning partner on a Friday night. It's not great for your family life, but you won't have to do it every Friday night, and it comes with the territory. Make sure people know you "stepped up" and know, subtly, how hard you are working. People notice. People remember. It doesn't hurt to send emails in the middle of the night.

But Don't Work Too Hard. On the other hand, there is always more work you can do. You can always have more assignments piled on your plate. If you let yourself get truly overworked, you invite mistakes, missed deadlines, dropped balls, and other problems. People will remember those screw-ups much more than all the hours you worked. So once you have bitten off a good amount of work, try not to bite off more — even though it's always available, absent a financial crisis. Then focus on doing a really great job, on time, on the assignments you've undertaken.

Understand What They Want. When you get an assignment, pay attention from the very beginning. Bring a notepad and take notes. Understand what your supervisor wants you to do, and how your supervisor wants you to present that work product. You don't want to find that you've wasted a lot of time producing something that's not what they want. You look bad that way, and you cause time crunches, emergencies, and billing write-offs. If you aren't sure what your supervisor wants, ask them. But try to collect all your questions at once rather than bombard your supervisor with a series of emails.



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Your Own Clients. Ultimately, with only the most occasional exceptions, your only security as you advance in your career will consist of having your own clients. When you start out, you don't face that pressure. You won't generate your own clients anyway. But you can start to build the foundations and sow the seeds so that you will later develop clients when you need to do that. Get to know and get friendly with the people you work with on your client's team. Build relationships with your own legal colleagues, many of whom will go off to become clients before long. Attend industry events and meet people. Develop your network before you need your network. Stay in touch with the people you meet. Treat your contacts as gold and never lose control of your contacts list. And maintain those relationships, both the close ones and the ones that aren't so close. It's often the latter relationships that lead to introductions, opportunities, and new clients.

Escape from Email. You're in an office. You can still walk down the hall and talk to someone. Do it. This will enhance the quality of your interactions, help you learn more, and build relationships that will ultimately help you. You might even have a conversation with someone and learn something that wasn't exactly what you expected.

Legal Research. Lawyers are supposed to know law and know how to find answers to legal questions. Those skills atrophy in legal practice, replaced by a general tendency to use online searches to answer every question. Don't let that happen. When legal questions arise, approach them as a lawyer. Get legal answers through legal research. You will learn far more than those answers. It's one of the best ways to develop your knowledge and legal skills.

Evaluation. You are always being evaluated. Behave accordingly. Dress the part. If you are at a firm event, don't drink too much. Don't do silly things generally. Although large classes of junior associates sometimes feel like everyone's in a fraternity, remember you're not. Everything you do or say can and will be used against you.

Headhunters. You will probably hang up on headhunters because you don't want to make a move any time soon, or you feel loyalty to the firm. Instead, try to identify two or three headhunters who you think are professional and knowledgeable about the marketplace. Get to know them, even if you tell them (as you should) that you don't plan to move any time soon. Like any other great networkers, headhunters have a long time horizon. They're happy to be a sounding board, and give you market insights and other advice, often from a very knowledgeable and seasoned perspective. They do all this in the hope that if you ever decide to move you will call them first. If and when that happens, you will have the great benefit of working with someone who already knows you, which will make the process much easier. In the meantime, you'll benefit from the relationship.

Email. Assume that your managing partner will read everything you say in any email message. Maintain a personal email account and use it for any personal email. Recognize that email isn't always the best medium for every conversation, especially one that's complicated or sensitive. Before you press "send" for any email, recheck the list of recipients. If you send someone a "blind" copy, there's a reasonable chance they



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will “reply all” and blow their cover (in [Microsoft Outlook](#) and similar email applications). You can easily prevent that. Instead of sending “blind” copies, forward a copy of the email at issue after you send it. That will also make it easier for you to track who got sent what. These comments only scratch the surface of how to mitigate the risks and problems of email.

Something Else. Legal practice, especially as a junior associate, can consume your entire life. But, beyond your practice and your family and friends, try to have one other significant thing going on in your life — involvement in a museum, a hiking group, a nonprofit, a sporting team — something where you will meet other people, develop connections to the larger world, and take a break.

Be Nice. Interact with everyone in a way that builds your personal brand. For that purpose, “everyone” starts with your secretary and the bicycle messenger delivering your dinner. It also includes your colleagues, paralegals and junior associates who might report to you, the partners who assign you work, and opposing counsel. Don’t complain. Don’t have fits. Don’t whine. Eventually, you develop a persona — an image and a perception of who you are — within the firm and even within the larger practice and business world. Your persona consists of the accumulated effect of all the interactions with everyone you’ve ever interacted with. And once you establish your persona, it travels through walls and doesn’t go away. Once the world perceives you as negative or a whiner or “difficult,” it’s very hard to change that. Don’t let it happen in the first place.