

The Legal Intelligencer

THE OLDEST LAW JOURNAL IN THE UNITED STATES 1843-2012

PHILADELPHIA, THURSSDAY, MARCH 1, 2012

VOL 244 • NO. 41

An **ALM** Publication

YOUNG  LAWYER

YOUNGLAWYERONLINE.COM

Communication Is Key in Move From Law Student to Lawyer

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Special to the Legal

Whether you start your legal career at a 1,000-lawyer international megafirm or a five-lawyer boutique, as a corporate transactional associate or a patent attorney, the first few years in practice can be overwhelming. After spending three years in law school learning an entirely new language and broad legal theory, you are now expected to push the vast majority of that knowledge aside and learn what it really means to be a lawyer.

So long, Mailbox Rule. See you later, Rule Against Perpetuities. Instead, your focus will be drawn to billable hours, business generation and client demands. Below are five practice tips that will help you transition from law student to lawyer.

1. E-MAIL: THE NEWSPAPER RULE

Ask any senior attorney you know and he or she will likely tell you that the single largest (although not necessarily greatest) difference between practicing law today and 20 years ago is e-mail. It's quick, convenient and makes you accessible 24 hours a day. We all have smartphones and



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remote access to our e-mail outside of the office, which means that anyone (yes, anyone) can reach out to you with a question, an assignment or a joke — and I caution you about that last one — at any hour of the day or night.

It also means that any e-mail that you send can be forwarded to anyone else — yes, anyone else — and you may never know about it. So, be very careful about the e-mails you send and to whom you send them; do not send any e-mail with contents you would not want to see on the front page of any newspaper with your name directly underneath.

This rule doesn't just apply to the obviously embarrassing jokes that you receive from a friend and forward on. It also applies to potentially sensitive or privileged client communications. As a corollary, always pay attention to whom the recipient of your e-mail is before

you hit the “send” button. An inadvertent push of the “reply all” button rather than “reply” could have serious implications with respect to attorney-client privilege and client confidentiality.

Avoid the tendency to immediately reply to every e-mail that you receive. Instead, treat each e-mail you send as if it were a letter. Organize your thoughts and structure your e-mail to convey those thoughts as clearly as possible. Obviously, this approach is not convenient or appropriate for every situation, but, more often than not, spending the time to carefully articulate your points in one all-encompassing e-mail instead of 15 one-liners will not only demonstrate your ability to effectively communicate but will be less annoying to the recipient.

2. GET INVOLVED IN YOUR COMMUNITY

In this context, the word “community” can mean any number of things: where you work, where you live, a specific trade or the legal community at large. The point is you should avoid spending all day, every day, within the four walls of your office.

Business generation is critical to every legal practice, and you will never get clients if you don't leave your desk. So join a trade group, volunteer for a local charity or establish a recurring date to network with colleagues in other industries or practice areas. No matter how you go about doing it, the point is to get involved and stay involved.

3. THE 24-HOUR RULE

In today's competitive legal market, clients (and partners) demand responsiveness. In this day and age, it is almost inconceivable that you will not have received an e-mail or voicemail within 24 hours after it was delivered. Make every effort to respond to a communication within 24 hours of receiving it.

You are probably wondering how this comports with my previous recommendation to collect your thoughts and avoid responding immediately to every e-mail or voicemail. Here is the distinction: If it is going to take more than 24 hours to articulate a well-reasoned response to a communication (which is understandable — we all get busy), simply send a note acknowledging that you received the communication and that you will respond at your first opportunity. That simple gesture gives you the time to complete your other work first and then formulate a coherent response.

Not responding within 24 hours can create the perception with a client, potential client, partner or even opposing counsel that you are unavailable or have not prioritized their matter appropriately. There are obvious exceptions to this rule (such as vacations or other personal matters when life interrupts work), but even

then, whenever possible, you should let your clients and colleagues know you will be unavailable so they are not left confused as to why they have not heard from you.

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4. DIVERSIFY YOUR PRACTICE

The perception among many legal practitioners is that it is better to be an "expert" in one area of law than to have a working knowledge of a number of different practice areas. Generally, this may be true, particularly if you can develop in-depth knowledge in a niche field that is not already dominated by other attorneys. However, do not be afraid to take on opportunities in other practice areas if it means learning something new.

This is not to suggest that a transactional attorney should volunteer to take a deposition tomorrow, but if you receive an assignment from a partner in a different practice field, don't panic and start looking for your quickest exit strategy. In time, practice area specialization may be the best way to build your book of business, but for the first few years of your career, it is more important that you learn as much as you can about being a lawyer from as many angles as possible.

5. FIND A MENTOR

Mentors can come in all shapes and sizes (and ages). Some young lawyers prefer to receive advice on the ins and outs of practicing law from those closer to them in age who have recently been in their position, while others prefer to speak with more senior attorneys who have been through a wide variety of career experiences. Some prefer a mentor within their practice area while others look outside their specialty (or sometimes even outside their firm) for their mentor.

The point is that being an attorney can, at times, be a very stressful experience, and without the lent ear of a mentor to guide you in the right direction, you may find yourself on the wrong path. Lawyers are paid to give advice and almost all are more than happy to give time to younger attorneys to discuss strategies, styles or legal issues. Don't feel the need to establish a formal mentorship with another lawyer, but try to find one or two colleagues you trust to offer sound guidance on the keys to a successful practice.

So there you have it — my five tips for getting your legal practice off to a good start and gaining respect among clients, colleagues and adversaries. While certainly not an all-inclusive list, hopefully at least one or two of the points above are new to you and provide you with a new approach to your workday. •