



## **ADVANCING AT YOUR FIRM**

This article highlights the discussion at “Advancing at Your Firm: Career Management Tips for Junior Associates,” a program hosted by the City Bar’s Career Advancement and Management Committee on March 4, 2013. The program was moderated by Allyson Albert, legal recruiter at A.W. Rush, and featured panelists Kira Davis of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind Wharton & Garrison, Peter Isajiw of Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft, and Susan Galligan, former Director of Professional Development at Schulte Roth & Zabel.

The program began with a discussion of why it is important for junior attorneys to engage in career management. Ms. Galligan told the audience that “no one is going to be more invested in your career than you are,” noting that when junior associates first start working it is easy for them to get caught up in the day-to-day aspects of the job and lose sight of the bigger picture—namely, where they are going over the long-term. She added that for junior associates who are first starting out at a firm, the partners are effectively the associates’ clients. It is therefore crucial for associates to develop a good reputation early on, as everything an associate does makes an impression on the partners. Following the preliminary discussion, the panelists tackled each of the following questions:

### **1. How Can a Junior Associate Develop the Skills He/She Needs to Succeed?**

In responding to this question Mr. Isajiw made a distinction between “hard skills” (e.g., substantive legal knowledge, drafting, negotiation) and “soft skills” (e.g., management skills, professional practice). To develop hard skills, associates should make the most of every assignment they are given, by asking questions and gleaning as many skills and as much knowledge as possible from each opportunity. Mr. Isajiw noted that pro bono projects can be very useful in this regard, as they require junior associates to think on their feet and afford them the chance to have more responsibility than they might typically have on a billable matter.

Junior associates can develop soft skills by being proactive on their matters, which helps them become visible to more senior attorneys. Ms. Davis also noted that it is extremely important for junior associates to be known as reliable, as this is the main quality senior associates seek when deciding who they want on a case or deal team. Reliability is likely to be viewed as more important than even specific experience or substantive knowledge. Ms. Davis noted that if you develop a reputation for reliability and target the senior associates for whom you would like to work, you will eventually be staffed on the matters that most interest you. The panelists also underscored the importance of working well with support staff, as they are often in the best position to help junior associates get things done efficiently and properly. Mr. Isajiw concluded the discussion on this topic by encouraging junior associates to become involved in bar associations, firm committees, and similar organizations as a way to enhance their professional practice.

## **2. What Are the Characteristics of Associates Who Effectively Transition from the Junior to Senior Level?**

A key characteristic of an associate who successfully transitions from a junior to a senior role is the ability to “take ownership” of a matter. Ms. Davis explained that fundamentally, taking ownership of your matter means treating everything on the matter as your problem. Even if a junior associate does not know how to resolve an issue that arises on a matter, the associate should be concerned about it getting resolved and pay attention to how that is ultimately accomplished. Ms. Davis also discussed the importance of successfully managing those on the team above the junior associate, including senior associates, partners, and even clients, pointing out that that efficient, succinct communication is a big part of “managing up.”

All of the panelists agreed that junior associates should learn early on the importance of being an effective problem solver. Firm lawyering requires attorneys to seek practical approaches for their clients, and an individual who only raises problems and criticisms without offering solutions will not be viewed as valuable to his or her matter teams.

## **3. What are Some Tips on Effectively Managing Junior Associates?**

As noted above, successful junior associates are typically adept at “managing up,” i.e., meeting deadlines, following instructions, and otherwise meeting the expectations of the senior associates and partners to whom they report. However, a common issue for junior associates transitioning to more senior roles is that they never learn how to effectively manage those working below them. Typical problems for midlevel and senior associates in this area include micromanaging, miscommunication of expectations on an assignment, and time mismanagement (i.e. not allotting enough time for an assignment to be completed).

Ms. Galligan suggested that these problems can be avoided if midlevel and senior associates plan ahead. Before meeting with a junior associate to give him or her an assignment, the senior associate should be clear on what is required and how long it will take to complete. Senior associates should take into account how long it may take to revise a junior associate’s initial work product before it is ready to be sent to a partner. Ms. Galligan also advised senior associates to be patient and open to questions from the junior associate. Junior associates need to feel like they can ask for clarification on an assignment, particularly since if they do not they could waste hours doing an assignment incorrectly. Although one-on-one training with junior associates can be time-consuming at the start, it pays off considerably in the long run. Mr. Isajiw echoed Ms. Galligan’s advice and added the following suggestion—junior associates should be aware of what they do not like about the management styles of those for whom they work, and when it comes time for them to manage others, they should avoid the same mistakes.

## **4. How Can Associates Make the Most of Mentoring Relationships?**

Ms. Galligan kicked off this discussion by noting that while formal mentoring programs can be beneficial, the most effective mentoring relationships are often formed outside of such programs. She offered the following tips for developing and fostering mentoring relationships:

- Have multiple mentors, ideally one for each of the different types of issues an associate might encounter (e.g., one mentor to consult when the associate has made a mistake

and needs to know what to do next, one mentor with whom the associate feels comfortable discussing career goals, etc.).

- Prepare for meetings with mentors—their time is valuable and an associate should go into a meeting with an agenda and knowledge of what he or she wants to achieve during the meeting.
- Once you are senior enough, serve as a mentor to junior associates, as mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial.

Ms. Davis added that if an associate is looking for a mentor, the associate should think of a matter on which he or she worked particularly hard or well, and strive to form mentoring relationships with the senior team member(s) on that matter.

#### 5. **How Can Associates Get Involved in Client Development?**

Client development is a skill that is important for junior associates to learn early on, but which is rarely taught by firms. The cornerstone of client development, as noted by Ms. Davis, is good client service and giving clients what they want. It is imperative that associates understand all of the client's objectives and work tirelessly to achieve them. Mr. Isajiw echoed this and added that associates at all levels should always be asking themselves whether the client feels good about its relationship with the firm and if not, what can be done to remedy that. Mr. Isajiw also stated that when it comes to turning potential clients into actual clients, all relationships matter, whether professional, friendly, casual, or longstanding. You can never tell where you will find a new client, so it is crucial for junior attorneys to be aware of opportunities and maintain their networks accordingly. (*Ed. Note – tips for building your professional network can be found [here](#).)*

#### 6. **What is Some Advice for Associates at Small Firms?**

One advantage of working at a small firm is that associates are often given more responsibility early on as compared to their peers at larger firms. However, small firms may be less likely than larger firms to offer formal skills training to their associates. The remedy for this, according to Ms. Albert, is for junior associates at small firms to be proactive about their development. Her suggestion to associates at small firms is to keep a running inventory of your skill set (including both hard and soft skills) and if you feel something is missing, ask the firm leadership to help you fill the gap. It is likely that the firm will also see the value in teaching the associates the relevant skills.

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