

THE NEW YORK CITY BAR ASSOCIATION

Ten Tips For Surviving Your First Year In Big Law

Below is a list of ten tips for surviving as a first year associate in a big law firm. This list is not intended to give you the hard skills of law firm practice (you will get enough of that at all your firm training sessions and through your work), but rather is supposed to provide you with some pointers that are often hidden in the so-called “black box” of law firm success.

1. **Find Mentors**

Every one tells you to do this, but no one tells you how. Finding mentors is similar to finding friends: It is somewhat instinctive and somewhat learned. First, do not rely on the formal mentor assignment system to find your mentor. Instead, look for senior lawyers with personalities similar to yours. These lawyers do not necessarily have to be in your own practice group; casting a wide net will better your chances of finding a mentor. You will meet several people through work assignments, trainings, and the myriad firm events. You do not want to foster every person you meet as a mentor. Firms are big and you will run into a lot of people with whom you have no common ground – accept this as a fact and move on by cultivating relationships with those people with whom you best get along. Once you find such a mentor you can rely on that person for any help in generally getting yourself situated to the firm, such as how to undertake work assignments, preferences of partners in how they like work done, and which types of activities at the firm you should partake in. More importantly, a good mentor will advocate for you both in and outside the firm, and will share with you his or her career and life advice whether you stay at the firm or move on.

2. **Develop A Thick Skin**

You will run into situations where you have unpleasant interactions with senior lawyers or colleagues with whom you are working. These often involve a senior associate or partner blatantly expressing dissatisfaction with your work product. While such situations will not be a constant part of your experience, they will make you feel that all your efforts are unappreciated while all your mistakes are scrutinized. This is par for the course, and so do not let it intimidate or frazzle you. Rather, stand your ground, calmly explain why you made a mistake, and ask follow-up clarification questions so you can rectify your errors. Confidently handling tough situations will earn your colleagues’ respect and change their behavior and attitude towards you.

3. **Be Prepared For High Expectations**

Understand that expectations will be high and that distinctions between you and your fellow first years will develop quickly. While you may not have received adequate practical training in law school, your law firm will expect you to learn very quickly. You will be given assignments concerning matters that appear arcane and incomprehensible – spend the extra time trying to piece things together

and understand the big picture. This is similar to the law school technique of “synthesizing” a body of law. Putting in some additional effort at the beginning to understand the basics will go a long way in terms of understanding more complex and varied tasks.

4. **Enhance Your Visibility**

Let people at the firm know who you are. Avoid the desire to hunker down and lay low. When going to firm events, set yourself a goal of talking to at least three partners in your practice group. This lets them know that you are interested in their group and eager to take on assignments. Also, in today’s environment where law firms are cutting associates, having your name out there and your presence known makes it less likely that partners will consider letting you go.

5. **Prepare all Work Product As If Final**

Regardless of your area of practice, you will be asked to do some writing and some problem solving. Senior associates or partners should be treated as clients, and therefore in terms of writing you should assume that all requested work product is final. Therefore, it is imperative that everything you write be error free. Be sure to check grammar, spelling, citations, etc. Bad writing is often associated with lax analytical thinking and a lack of attention to detail. As a matter of fact, careful writing applies not only to work product but to almost everything else you write, including emails. In today’s working world conversations are few and emails are plenty. Do not let something as simple as an email reflect badly on your writing ability. Regarding problem solving, you will often be asked to research legal questions concerning whether a client’s proposed course of action is legally permissible. As a lawyer you will be expected to not only give a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ conclusion on legality, but also to come up with creative solutions to problems. This means that when researching such questions you should look at alternative courses of action and try to come up with solutions addressing the client’s particular situation.

6. **Meet Deadlines**

While seemingly simple and easy to follow, meeting deadlines can be challenge. Always be sure to meet your deadlines on assignments, and preferably finish early. When given an assignment ask your supervising attorney when she expects you to deliver a product. Once you know the deadline, give yourself a sufficient cushion to go back to your supervisor with questions and issues. Do not ask for extensions. It strikes a very bad note when first years begin their career by asking for extensions. As a first year, you have yet to build up your trust capital with senior lawyers, and therefore it is important that you first build the trust of your supervisor before you even think about asking for extensions.

7. **Be Flexible**

Be willing to take on assignments in practice areas outside the ones of your original choice. This is especially important in today’s economy. As transactional work dries up with the financial crisis, it is important to look to areas such as

bankruptcy or regulatory for work. Taking on assignments in these fields is not in vain as it will give you skills, such as conducting due diligence and drafting, that are easily transferable to the transactional realm. Also, displaying a willingness to help out the firm by taking on work outside your practice area is viewed very favorably by partners.

8. **Be On Top Of Your Billing**

Associates often neglect this part of the job, dismissing it as an administrative task beyond the pale of lawyers. However, inputting your hours on a timely basis is essential to your survival as a first year. Bad timekeeping can lead to wasted hours spent trying to catch up on your billing and is often the cause of much stress in the profession. Here's a simple tip – at the end of each day (even if it is an all-nighter) take ten minutes to input all your time for that day. Develop this good timekeeping habit early so that it does not come back to haunt you later.

9. **Make Use Of Downtime**

Believe it or not you will have periods where you are less busy than usual. Such times are a great, and often squandered, opportunity to build your skills as a lawyer and make yourself more marketable. Take on a pro bono project, attend training seminars, or volunteer to do non-billable projects such as writing an article or marketing pitch within your practice area. These activities will not only widen your skill set at the firm, but will also give you a chance to develop client relationships. The latter is important to bringing in business, and while this may not be on your mind as a first year associate, cultivating business relationships will be an asset whether you stay at your law firm or move elsewhere. To this end it is important to also directly build business relationships by calling your friends or colleagues to see what they are working on and if they need any legal help. Remember that people you knew from before you joined your firm could be potential clients sometime down the road – take the time now to take them out to lunch or coffee, for it is never too early to start developing possible business relationships.

10. **Find Personal Time For Yourself**

Working at a law firm is highly demanding and the experience can be overwhelming to first years. It is important that you find time for yourself and activities you enjoy. Although it may be difficult to lead an active life outside of work, try to find time for the little things like having dinner with a friend, going to a movie, or going for a run.

While challenging, embarking on your first year in big law will be an exciting and interesting experience. Big law firms provide outstanding training provided that will serve you however your career progresses. Moreover, working in big law will open up many doors and give you the mobility to choose from a wide array of career opportunities in the future.

Article by Ashwini Jayaratnam, Member of the Career Advancement and Management Committee, June 2010.