



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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Survival Tips for the First-Year Associate

For many law school graduates, their first taste of practicing law comes from working as an associate at a law firm. For those people who have opted to join a large firm, the first year of practice is probably filled with both excitement and stress. There are many wonderful perks that come with being an associate at a big firm (prestige, high salary, etc.). At the same time, however, there are many potential pitfalls that junior-level associates will want to be aware of and avoid. In this article I have included some tips for surviving your first year of practice at a law firm.

Picking Your Practice Area

Firms differ on whether or not they let their first-year associates choose the practice area that they will specialize in. If there is some flexibility, most firms will generally let their associates state a preference for a specific area of law and try to place them within those practice groups. In addition, these decisions are sometimes finalized during the summers that the associates are interning with the firms as summer associates.

If you are an attorney who is joining a firm as a first-year associate and did not participate in the firm's summer program, you may have a more limited choice as far as practice areas go. If you are unsure as to which route you want to take (e.g., transactional versus litigation), you may want to speak to friends/contacts who practice in those specific areas of law to get as much information as possible. Associates are often surprised at how different practicing law is in comparison to what they learned in law school and student clinics.

Other important elements in choosing your area of law are the reputation of each practice group at the firm and the key partners you will be working with. For instance, if one of the groups you are interested in has a partner who is a known "screamer," you may want to reconsider your choice of that area of law in this stage of your career.

Longevity in a big firm setting is usually directly correlated with the partners you are assigned to and their working styles/personalities. Of course, associates with specialized backgrounds (e.g., environmental or intellectual property) may not have much of a choice regarding the practice groups they will be joining.

Getting Assignments

During your summer internship or anytime before your first day of work, you will want to speak to someone who will give you an honest assessment of how your firm gives assignments to its associates. As your good standing in the firm will be directly related to the number of billable hours you produce, you will want to ensure that you will have enough work to meet and possibly exceed these billable requirements.

Some firms have very structured methods of giving assignments to associates, and other firms rely heavily on partner input. If your firm falls into the second category, you will need to begin fostering strong relationships with

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the partners and senior associates around you. It is important to do this so that you will receive high-quality assignments and enough work to fully establish your stability within the firm.

Being too passive in asking for assignments is often a stumbling block for those attorneys who are not as aggressive as their counterparts. Each situation needs to be evaluated individually in terms of firm processes and the personalities of the partners you are working with. Thus, it is imperative to get this type of information before you begin working so that you can start off on the "right foot" and avoid having to panic about a lack of billable hours later in the year.

Do Not Participate in Office Gossip

Office politics are alive and well at most large law firms. As early as on your first day, you may encounter fellow associates, partners, and staff who want you to participate in their daily gossip sessions. Although it is tempting to get involved and contribute to these types of conversations, try to avoid getting involved in them. In establishing your reputation at the firm, you definitely do not want to be known as the person who is gossiping about everyone else.

If someone asks you to comment on a "juicy" piece of information he or she has directly relayed to you, try to respond by either tactfully changing the subject or replying in a neutral manner. Just as we were taught when we were little kids, if you don't have something favorable to say about someone, it is best to remain silent on the subject.

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Do Not Whine

For a lot of attorneys, this initial position at a law firm may be their first professional job ever. Therefore, exuding a mature demeanor at the firm is imperative. One way of giving the exact opposite impression is to whine.

Do not whine about the long hours or working on the weekends or things as mundane as the traffic driving to the office. Most everyone you will encounter at the firm is under pressure, and the last thing they want to hear about is your stress as a first-year associate. Not only is it unprofessional to whine, it is also a behavior that will likely alienate you from others. People tend to be wary of continuously negative people, and attorneys are no exception to this rule.

Treat Everyone with the Same Level of Respect

It is often said that you can tell a lot about a person's character from how he or she treats people who are not his or her professional superiors or managers. At your firm give everyone the same level of respect that you would like to be treated with. This is both the right thing to do and the smart thing to do.

Your support staff, including paralegals, legal secretaries, and the administrative team, will be a huge part of your success at the firm. Speak to them in the same tone and with the same level of consideration that you would give your supervising partners and high-profile clients. There is nothing more annoying than first-year associates who give "attitude" to other employees at the firm when they themselves are new to the profession.

Be a Team Player

It is important to be a team player in any work environment, but especially in a law firm setting. You will need to establish good relationships with both your partners and fellow associates. Ideally, you will want to foster the reputation of being the person to go to if something needs to be done well. In addition, if you are open to taking projects that are less interesting and working on days that are undesirable (like weekends) once in a while, you will truly endear yourself to your colleagues.

Not only will this extra effort be reflected well in your relationships, but it will hopefully translate into recognition, promotion, and bonuses from the firm. Furthermore, it is always a good idea to help your coworkers when they need it the most. You never know when you will need to ask them for a favor, and establishing this type of goodwill early on will likely pay off in the future.

Regarding your supervising partners, you will also specifically want to foster close relationships with these attorneys so that you can receive invaluable mentoring and advice from them. In addition, having a partner in your corner may also help you keep your job if the firm's needs change or the market changes. For instance, associates who lack close bonds with their supervising partners will likely be the first to get laid off if the managing committee decides later on that it needs to downsize the firm.

Get Involved and Network

Being a new associate can be mentally draining. The learning curve is steep in most practices of law, and you are also trying to forge positive relationships with both your coworkers and clients. Although you may be tempted to skip the office luncheons and different firm committee meetings, try to participate in some of your firm's networking activities.

By investing some of your personal time in the firm, you will likely garner respect as an associate who is trying to contribute to the firm's overall success. By attending firm events, you will also have a chance to meet other members of the firm, which is a beneficial thing in case you want to switch practice areas in the future. Networking within your firm may also allow you to get introduced to different high-profile clients, which will help you develop your ability to attract and retain future business contacts.

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Pace Yourself

Managing stress is really one of the key ingredients in a successful first year at a law firm. When your daily life starts to feel overwhelming, you will need to remember to pace and center yourself amidst all the stress of your professional and personal lives.

Attorneys are generally overachievers and perfectionists. Understand that you will not become an expert in your craft overnight or even within the first year. As long as you are patient with your development as an attorney and make it a priority to develop your personal life outside of the firm, you should be able to maintain a good work/life balance in your first year.

Another important skill to have as an attorney is the ability to leave work at work. Start formulating coping mechanisms so that stress from work does not spill into your personal life. Having downtime and relaxation time is necessary, so don't disregard all of your hobbies and passions outside of the law once you join the firm.

Your personal development outside of the firm has to remain a priority. There is room for everything in your life, including exercise, fun, and vacations. Implementing stress-management techniques during work hours (e.g., meditation, mandatory breaks, etc.) and investing energy in your personal life will help you avoid feeling burned out. Achieving balance in your life will also help to ensure that you have a long career at the firm (if that is what you desire).

Healthy Venting

Earlier in this article, I mentioned that it is not a good idea to engage in whining at the firm. Venting to people you trust (outside of the firm), however, is something that you absolutely should engage in. Speak to your significant other, friends, and family about your concerns and frustrations regarding your law firm. It is really beneficial to recognize and deal with these types of feelings as bottling them up can often lead to extreme burnout and health problems.

Generally it is safer to vent to people who are not affiliated with the practice of law in any way (as it tends to be a "small world" with lawyers). In discussing your feelings of anxiety, anger, or frustration, try to get a sense of whether these feelings are fleeting or if you need to start thinking about finding a different job or firm to work with.

Adhere to Office Culture

Even within the same firm, different offices can vary greatly with respect to culture. Before your official start date,

try to analyze the culture of your specific office, and if at all possible, try to fit into this culture. For instance, if all of the people in your office keep their doors open while working, you will probably want to do this as well.

Furthermore, some partners are more high maintenance when it comes to attending firm events outside of work. The larger offices tend to be more flexible regarding these types of situations as larger offices have more diverse groups of people.

The impression you give in your first few months of practice will likely have an impact on your long-standing reputation at the firm. Thus, if the specific traits of your office's culture are within reason, try to seamlessly adapt to this environment and become a part of the pack.

Be Smart about Your Long-Term Career Goals

If you find that you are completely miserable at the firm, it is now time to reevaluate your career. As a rule of thumb, most firms will want an associate to have been employed with his or her previous firm for at least two to three years. If associates are truly stellar, however, some firms may still seriously consider them even if they have only been employed with an individual firm for a year.

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For most candidates, it is a good idea to stay at your current firm for at least two years to increase your marketability. After two years of employment with your current firm, it will be a lot easier to find a new and comparable position at a different firm. Of course, you need to balance being smart about your career choices with being true to yourself. Remember: there are always exceptions to every rule. If you find yourself in an abusive situation or the stress of firm life is affecting your health and well-being, you may very well need to leave before hitting your two-year mark at the firm.

If, however, your unhappiness at the firm is tolerable and you are able to stick it out for a few more years, it would probably be a good idea to do so. If you have a couple of years of experience under your belt and you look for a job while you are still employed, these factors will significantly increase your chances of finding a new position when you are ready to make the move.