

How to Handle a New Work Environment

By Kevin Quinn

So your resume and cover letter were written up all nice, you managed to avoid embarrassing yourself during three separate interviews, and you were granted an offer to work at a new law firm. You may be thinking that the difficult part is over, but having gotten your foot in the door, you now have to push it open and walk through without tripping over the gag wire if you hope to have a long and fruitful career at this new firm. Starting a new position can be just as taxing and stressful as the job search that got you that position, especially considering the politics and the bizarre cultures that are inherent to some firms. Figuring out how to get through the rocky first weeks will prove important in making the kind of first impression that has people thinking "partner potential" instead of "first to go." Here are a few helpful hints to help you come out on top:

Don't Be Afraid to Ask for Work

Because you were hired to work at this firm, there is a strong likelihood that it actually has something for you to do. Some firms will not hesitate to sit you right down at a desk and rope your legs to your office chair. Others, however, may be more protective of their work. Yes, they brought you in because they thought they could use you, but some partners will not be willing to give you anything until they are sure that you are capable of doing the kind of work that they have come to expect from other associates. What this can mean is a much larger workload for other associates, who may begin to resent you if you don't step up to the plate. If you are a highly qualified attorney brought in during a slow period because you add prestige to the firm (rather than during a time of need), partners with favorite associates are unlikely to give you work just because you are there.

The best way to overcome a problem like this is to make it clear from the beginning that you are there to work and that the work you do is on par with (or better than) the work that the firm expects from its associates. Go up to a partner who seems swamped and casually reference the fact that you have been sitting in your office for the past half hour watching the clock as precious billable minutes pass. It may seem nice and relaxing to be checking out what's going on in the world of sports or entertainment via the firm's super fast Internet connection, but chances are the more you do that, even if you do not have any work to do, the less the partners are going to value you.

If there is no work to be done in your particular practice area, make it clear that you are willing to branch out. If you were brought on to handle corporate work and the real estate group is swamped, make yourself useful by offering to take on some of that work, provided you know what you are doing. You will not have to do this forever, just until you have established yourself as reliable. Once the work picks up in your practice area, you have already made a good name for yourself. If you do not prove immediately useful to the firm, the partners are not going to feel a strong allegiance to you, and you may soon find yourself in the midst of yet another lengthy job search.

Don't Rock the Boat

In your first few weeks at a new office, you might be appalled at the inefficiency in how things are conducted. Everyone has a certain way of doing things, just as every firm has different methods. [Making it clear that you think something is being done incorrectly on the first day of your job can be taken in the wrong way](#), and you do not want to ruffle any feathers at the outset. In particular, mentioning that a previous firm you worked for handled things much better than your current firm makes it seem like you think your old firm is better than your new firm. Whether or not this is true, many people are very protective of their workplace and will not take kindly to your bashing their firm.

Never suggest changing something for the sole reason that it is how you are used to doing things. You are at a new office; therefore, you must adhere to new rules. Suggesting that everyone else should change their ways to accommodate you makes you look like a prima donna. Besides, given time, you are likely to get used to their methods, just as everyone else at that firm has.

If you feel that you have suggestions that will really make a positive difference in the way things are run, then by all means, make these suggestions. You might want to wait until after you have gotten a read on the people that will most likely be affected by the changes you want to propose, though. Support staff, managing partners, fellow associates in your practice group—all of these people may somehow have their jobs altered in some way, and you need to realize what people are going to have to do differently. If more responsibility will fall on certain people, make sure they are amenable to taking it on, or they will likely treat you like the Antichrist for making their jobs more difficult. It may take some people longer than others to be able to figure out how their co-workers will react to change, but it is best to wait it out and get to know them fully before you turn their worlds upside down.

Treat the Support Staff Fairly

You may have ordered your secretary to shine your shoes and clean out your wastebasket with a toothbrush at your last firm, but unless that secretary is following you to this firm, you should not assume that you have the same kind of relationship with the support staff of your new firm. The support staff at most any firm is much more influential than you might think, as many of them have been working there for far longer than the majority of the attorneys. Their opinions will be heard, and if they have issues with you, particularly if they are much more senior than you are, they could give you a bad name in the firm, not just among the support staff.

Everyone knows, but few will admit, that most **attorneys' jobs** would be ten times more difficult without the help of a support staff. Getting them on your side and making them eventually willing to go that extra mile usually is built upon a strong relationship from the beginning. A secretary or paralegal who does not have to stay past 6:00 pm will not be willing to if he/she is doing it only to help a relentless jerk that chastised him/her for using the wrong font in a pompous firm memo you drafted to introduce yourself to the other attorneys. Once you find out with whom you will be working, take them out to lunch and discuss how you prefer to do things, as well as how your ways may differ from theirs. If you prove you are nice and willing to give as much as you take, then those that work for you should be willing to do the same.

If they are not willing to change for you at all or are just generally not up to your standards, then you have a problem. Give them time to adjust to your style of doing things, but it is not necessary to wait a year before deciding that you are sick of having to do the things that should fall under a paralegal or secretary job description. If you are going to try to get someone fired, though, you will probably face some backlash, especially if that person stays and has friends at the office. Do what you think is necessary when the timing is right, but be prepared to deal with the fallout of possibly being despised for the rest of your days at that firm.

If It is Possible, Make Allies (The Right Kind)

Walking into any new situation can be tough, especially if you are an intrinsically shy person. Many attorneys start new situations with some friends already at the firm (which, coincidentally, was the main reason they got the jobs in the first place). For those of you who do not, though, things are going to be much rougher in getting to know people, as **law firms** sometimes tend to be the kinds of places that don't exactly breed social interaction. However, having someone to help show you the ropes of a new work situation could be invaluable in getting the right kind of attention right away, so it is important to try. Most law firms will have some sort of mentoring programs in place, but they may neither apply to anyone but the first-years nor be very helpful. Find people you like who can help you figure things out and give you the kind of insider information that will help you thrive.

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Of course, the above advice could all be moot in any given situation, as law firms all operate differently. A top law firm might just be interested in how many hours you can bill and not really even notice if you are making efforts to be an affable co-worker or boss. A smaller law firm may only take into consideration how pleasant you are to be around. In any case, the best possible advice you could receive is to just survey the surroundings-the work you will be doing, the people you will be working with, and everything else-and adapt accordingly. If things did not work out at the last place you worked, perhaps you did not make enough of an effort to prove yourself. Be sure to prove yourself at your new job immediately so that you do not fall victim to the same fate twice.