

Should I Try and Get Business for My Firm or Should I Try to Bill More Hours?

Question: I'm a senior associate, and my firm wants me to start marketing and getting business for the firm. However, I feel it is more important to focus on my legal practice, and bill lots of hours. Learning marketing seems like a low priority - after all, it isn't billable. I didn't choose law just to end up doing sales. Besides, a high biller has job security, right?

Answer: I can't tell you how many associates, as they get more senior, make this mistake. It is true that some very large firms will never require even equity partners to originate business. However, this scenario has become more and more rare. In midsize and smaller firms, you will most likely be required to cultivate business at some point. It is true that this is not billable work; however, you need to do it anyway.

The road to making equity partner is harder than you can imagine, and involves lots of time that you cannot bill. Even worse, you still have to bill the mega-hours you are expected to bill on your legal work. Even so, to make the run for partner, you have to learn how to originate business. [Attend the marketing courses, trainings, and any networking events the firm is offering. Also, you should network independently of the firm.](#) You should also start participating in bar events, social events, and seeking out speaking engagements. Take advantage of cross selling opportunities through the firm. Are partners offering to bring you along to meet their clients? Take the hint! None of these activities are billable, but they will pay off for you in the end.

As to not wanting to do this work because it isn't what you signed up for when you went to law school, it is time to [reframe your way of thinking if you want to become a partner in a law firm](#). Once you get to partner level, business is the name of the game.

In the old days, it was possible to become an equity partner by only servicing other partners' clients. This is rare nowadays. As a partner, you are a member of a corporate partnership, and that makes you a businessperson. Start thinking like one.

Partners are expected to fully understand and participate in the business part of the law firm. If the thought of schmoozing and selling business really makes your skin crawl, think about going in-house or to the government. However, the more senior you get, the less marketable you will be to law firms if you have no [portable business](#).

I have heard people tell me that they are on track to make partner, or will never be let go, because they bill a lot of hours. Not so! During the recession, we actually saw equity partners de-equitized because they were servicing someone else's clients, and the business dried up. They were let go, and had only their skills to sell, and those skills were not in demand. Law is cyclical - certain practice areas will be leaner than others, and you never know which practices will be robust at any given time, and which will be lean. The only way to prevent against layoff or de-equitization is to have your own clients, and the only way to have your own clients is to learn how to cultivate business. If you want to make it to partnership, you need to accept this now, and start working towards improving your marketing skills.

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