

How to Successfully Network in a Law Firm

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Networking. It's really not a dirty word. In fact, it's something you should be doing regularly, consciously and with purpose. As a legal recruiter, I regularly meet with some surprised reactions when I ask what networking a candidate is doing on her own. The surprise, I've found, often stems from a belief that if an attorney has particular credentials and enough experience, she does not need to [engage in networking](#). It's as if networking is only for the weak and lesser qualified, and/or the brown-nosing, aggressive types.

It would do us good to shift our view of what networking can be, and what its purpose is. Networking does not need to be a self-interested, shameless, forced acquaintance with others for the purpose of attempting to advance ourselves to positions we cannot attain on our merits alone. Rather, we should see it as a positive practice of cultivating long-term relationships to gather information, gain exposure, and, yes, learn about both client development and job opportunities.

Why Networking is Necessary to Law Firm Practice

The young, well-credentialed attorney who goes to a large law firm would do well to not do what might seem obvious close the door, put her head down and work as hard as she can. If she thinks that just by working hard and excluding external influences, she will have long-term success, she is mistaken. By doing this, she runs the risk of missing work opportunities, and being left behind or being kept out of the loop. She also risks becoming stagnant in her practice, being unable to develop clients and thus less valuable to the firm who currently employs her. This is because when an attorney keeps her head down and devotes little to no energy to widening her network, she also keeps her opportunity for information gathering small. Consider some of the changes that occur within law firms, the knowledge of which is shared amongst insiders first: partners leaving, offices closing and opening, and practices expanding or contracting. With a small or non-existent network, the attorney limits her knowledge of the kind of pivotal information that is acquired through people in the know who is doing what kind of work with which firm, what practices are thriving, and the changes coming down the pike. Without this information, the attorney cannot anticipate and prepare for changes, or capitalize upon opportunities.

Indeed, the [law firm model](#) itself speaks to the necessity of networking. Think about how firms generate business. Work almost always comes from partners who have made contacts somewhere outside the firm. These partners have gotten involved in the community and met people outside of their immediate group of attorneys, and these people have given them business and/or spread the word about the attorney and the good work she does. [Partners' networking efforts are the very reason why associates are employed](#). There is thus a double benefit for attorneys who network well. Since a firm wants an attorney to network to bring in new clients and new work, and an associate wants to be valuable to her firm, it behooves the attorney to network for her standing at the firm. Of course, the buildup of a portfolio of clients, and a roster of professional acquaintances, provides the attorney with future options as to where to practice and with whom.

What You Can Do, While Still Working Hard and Billing Strong

Networking is not an exercise in which you begin to engage when you've decided you want a new job, nor is it something you do at particular events only. You need to have a network to call upon when a need does arise. People can discern desperate, self-interested inquiries into how their practice is going and how they like their firm. Instead, you should focus on regularly building and maintaining relationships with others in

your field on an ongoing and organic basis.

Make it a point to keep in touch with folks with whom you meet at a CLE event, or to whom you are introduced through another friend or colleague. Say you connected over work or family or faith. Take whatever may be the link and build on it over time. Reach out to people with a mention of an event you heard about that may be of interest to them. Or, just send a note checking in every once in a while in a specific, relevant way. When was the last time someone reached out to you without a request for any information, but rather just to say hello and see how your family is doing? Always be ready to volunteer to help someone. Favors are not easily forgotten. By the same token, thank those who carve out time to help you, share news with you, or serve as a reference for you.

You are always building upon your reputation and your "brand", whether you are intending to do so or not, and you are doing so at the office and outside of work as well. Do your best to connect folks who can be of help to each other. Indeed, some of the best net workers I know are the ones who are generous with their own networks and, thus, multiply their base by adding acquaintances to their own network by opening up new doors for their connections.

None of the above named practices are exceptional or innovative, of course. My point in enumerating a few ideas is to remind you that networking need not mean traveling to CLEs every weekend, or attending every single local bar association even, but rather, that you can engage with others from your desk.

Conclusion

You should think in terms of developing long term relationships, whether you meet someone at your firm or away from the office. Be mindful to network regularly, and do so with its importance to your career in mind. You'll find yourself in better standing at your firm today because you'll be seen as a contributor with potential for [adding value to the firm](#), and with greater opportunities tomorrow to make the kind of changes you may want because you will have greater occasions to learn about the opportunities in the first place.