

# Top 10 Pieces of Advice for First Year Associates

**Summary:** This article discusses the top 10 ways you can be a great lawyer at a large law firm.

You and your family were so proud at graduation. You were thrilled to be able to say that you had secured **employment at a premier firm in Los Angeles**.

Over the previous summer you had become convinced that this firm was at the center of the legal universe and surely a place where you would gain the experience required to represent titans of industry in their legal problems. You either moved to Los Angeles or found a new apartment commensurate with your new-found six-figure wealth and hunkered down to survive the bar exam.

Wearing your new work clothes and carrying the briefcase you got as a graduation present, you appeared at the firm for your first day of work, wondering what legal problems you would tackle first. After filling out countless forms, you are now sitting at your perfectly arranged and fully stocked desk, **ready to make your mark on the legal world**.

So here you are, an associate at a large Los Angeles law firm. **You will never read an obituary in the Los Angeles Times describing someone who spent a legal career being a great associate**. You will, however, read obituaries that trumpet great lawyers. That is the goal: being not a great associate, but a great lawyer. No one is going to make this leap for you, so it is up to you to take advantage of every opportunity your firm provides to make yourself into an advocate, counselor and advisor. This article discusses ways to do it at a large law firm.

## 1. Steal from the Senior Associates and Partners

In the offices around you is some terrific legal talent. At your firm, you will undoubtedly find truly great lawyers. They are diverse in their styles, habits and approaches. Recognize this and harness the power it provides. Analyze what they do and how they do it. Steal. When you see a partner who does something in a way you find effective, do not ask for permission, simply take it from them and make it your own. Take the bits and pieces from individual lawyers to create a composite of skills and styles that works for you. Take the time to see how different people attack the same task. Find the ways which are best suited to you, improve on them and make them your own. If you do it well, someday a young lawyer will steal from you. Put simply, great lawyers learn from other great lawyers.

**See the following article for more information:**  
**Be Around Those With High Expectations of You**

## 2. Ask Questions of the Senior Associates and Partners

Admit that you lack experience and ask simple questions. If you do not know why you are doing something, ask. While you may think that asking questions will unmask your inexperience to the people you are working with, remember that they too were once in your shoes and they already know the limits of your legal knowledge. Your colleagues will most often be more than happy to showcase their own knowledge under the auspices of explaining something to you.

For example, you are given an issue to research. You are a lawyer and not a research robot performing a specific task. To attack the issue like a great lawyer, you need to know why it is important and what you are trying to argue. Having that understanding will help you find the nuances and analogous cases that are not directly on point, but nonetheless often strongly support your position.

Keep in mind that any associate can mindlessly do the tasks asked of them, great lawyers know why they are doing them in the first place.

**See the following articles for more information:**

**Making Others Aware of Your Weaknesses Can Make You More Trusted Instead of Seeking Praise, Seek Criticism**

**The Importance of Asking the Right Questions, Self-improvement, and Perception**  
**The Importance of Trust and Access to Information**

### **3. Realize That Most of What You Do as an Attorney Another Attorney Has Done Before**

In the course of your practice it will be the rarest of circumstances when you are asked to do something that no lawyer has ever attempted. If you think that you have, think about it again, because the chances are overwhelming that you are wrong. The wheel has been invented, do not waste your time (and your client's money) inventing it again. In all probability, there is someone within shouting distance who has done what you are being asked to do. Seek those people out, find the forms and look for materials - articles, books, Practicing outlines -which will assist you. Does your firm have a computerized form-file or brief bank? Use these resources early and often.

For example, you have been asked to research a complicated issue of patent law. In the course of your research, you found a case in that is nearly dead on point. Instead of being satisfied with the opinion, get the briefs from the court file and make use of the unending hours of research that other associates have already done on your issue.

As explained below, this will help get you out of the office and into a real life - a required attribute of any great lawyer.

**See the following articles for more information:**

**Increasing Efficiency is Your Best Route to Employment Security**  
**Watching Waste in Your Job**

### **4. Sweat the Details (They Are Very, Very Important in the Practice of Law)**

Throughout your first year, and even after, you will sometimes be asked to handle tasks that seem mundane and simplistic, if not downright menial. And often times, you will be exactly right. Try to avoid falling into the trap of believing that these are the sort of tasks that are undeserving of your complete attention. Associates do that, great lawyers do not.

Although no one may ever read the 200 page due diligence memorandum you spent a month slaving over, it is still your work and your firm's product. It may go unnoticed and unrecognized, but take pride in it anyway. You never know when, in the course of doing something mundane, you will stumble on the significant and important. Careers and reputations of great lawyers are often made by noticing the significant amid a sea of the mundane. Such keen perception is born of attention to detail and enthusiastic effort. If you think it is all mindless, you will miss what some other great lawyer will see.

Great lawyers sweat the details.

**See the following articles for more information:**

[Pay Attention to the Details](#)

[The Importance of Productivity, Focus and Measurement](#)

[Never Overlook the Obvious](#)

## 5. Pursue Opportunity

You bill your time. To appease clients' fears of inflated fees, you will sometimes miss out on the fruits of your labor. After all, what client wants to pay to have you attend an oral argument as a spectator? But, as mentioned above, part of your development as a great lawyer is seeing those with more experience in action so you can steal their skills. Despite what you may believe, you can do this without billing your time. Ask to attend the argument and bill your time to legal training. While you may have countless other things to do and getting there requires that you juggle your schedule, get out of your office at every opportunity to see great lawyers in their natural habitats.

Great lawyers do not accept missed opportunities to see other great lawyers showcasing their skills. You will not learn what you do not see.

**See the following articles for more information:**

[He Who Sees True Opportunities Shall Always Prosper](#)

[Move Toward the Light](#)

## 6. Hone Your Skills

You cannot become a great lawyer only by watching other great lawyers. You have to hone your freshly stolen skills. Whether it is a small matter for a client or a pro bono case, find ways to try on what you have learned. It may be a trivial thing, negotiating the language of a boilerplate provision or litigating a minor discovery dispute, but it is trivial to your development only if you make it so. Take hold of these chances to practice what you have learned and see what works and does not work for you. You may have just started, but find another associate and team up on a pro bono matter. Remember why you went to law school in the first place - you wanted to practice law. It is sometimes easy in a [big firm](#) to avoid having to actually practice law. Especially as a junior attorney, you can spend your time assisting others who actually practice law. Resist that temptation and do everything you can to practice law yourself.

Great lawyers hone their craft because no one will hone it for them.

**See the following articles for more information:**

[Practice Makes Perfect](#)

[Steve Jobs Was an Asshole](#)

## 7. Be Professional

Perhaps you have worked in a professional environment before, or perhaps, like many of your first year colleagues, this is your first real full-time employment experience. Whatever your background, [adjusting to the stress and pressure of working in a law firm](#) environment may not be as easy as you think.

You may be privileged to work with great people who are endlessly nice and who become your friends. Do not forget that your firm is a place of business. Everyone from the most senior partner to the temporary support staff deserves respect and is entitled to work in an atmosphere that is conducive to getting the job done. Great lawyers leave the jokes, innuendos and personal comments in the locker room and out of the conference room. Many firms now have casual Fridays or casual summers; always remember that this applies to what you wear and not how you act.

There will be times in your career where you will feel stupid and fall victim to (hopefully) undeserved harsh words and raised voices. It would serve you best to take most of these bad experiences, and the good ones for that matter, with a grain of salt. These times require the perspective and judgment that come from having a life outside the office. You will make mistakes just like the great lawyers before you and the great lawyers after you. Accept blame when it is deserved and defend yourself when it is not.

For all their efforts, great lawyers are not perfect, just close.

## 8. Get Feedback

At some relatively regular interval, you will be reviewed by the people who supervise you. Most often, these reviews will speak of your development, good attitude and dedication in general terms. Rarely will they offer specific feedback on specific skills. Seek that feedback out and use it as a learning tool. When you jump at the chance to put your skills to work, ask your colleagues how you have done and how you can improve. Pointers like these are some of the best development tools you will ever have, but most associates are simply afraid to ask for fear that they will not like the answer. The answers your ego will like the least are the ones that bring you closer to being a great lawyer.

As Jack Nicholson has taught us, all great lawyers "can handle the truth."

**See the following articles for more information:**

[Face Reality](#)

[Winning in Your Job Search and Life Means Going Forward No Matter What Criticism You May Receive](#)

## 9. Get Help When Needed

Great lawyers all have great help. There will be times when people in your firm literally save your professional life. Whether it is your secretary, the people in duplicating or the word-processing department, your support staff will arrange to do the impossible to make you look good. Great lawyers acknowledge and praise these people generously. In fact, they do it to a fault. Great lawyers do not motivate people by fear and anger. Your mother told you that you lure more flies with honey than vinegar, and in this context she was right, especially for new attorneys.

There will be times when you are praised for things you did (and did not do); share the credit with those who helped you. They deserve it for all the times they have had to deal with less than great lawyers.

Great lawyers share credit with the people who help them be great lawyers.

**See the following articles for more information:**

[Improve When Others are Not](#)  
[Never Stop Improving](#)

## You Need to Be in Favor With the Right People

### 10. Have a Life

Go back to your firm's brochure; chances are you have forgotten the part which discusses the well-rounded lives their lawyers lead. This applies to you. Great lawyers have interests outside the law. They have friends and hobbies; they read great books and play sports. While there are many reasons to have a life, for purposes of this article, we will limit ourselves to your career. Great lawyers have perspective and judgment. Perspective and judgment do not come from endless hours at the firm alone, they come from experiences both in law and in life. As a great lawyer, you have to understand people - their fears and their motivations. If you need further justification for having a life, this article will not provide it.

You are embarking on an exciting time in your life. In the coming weeks and months you will be learning a tremendous amount about the practice of law and how to be a great associate at your [new firm](#). Amidst all this, keep focused on the goal of being a great lawyer and enjoy the ride.