BCG’s Guide to Succeeding as a First-Year Associate

The legal recruiters at BCG Attorney Search have helped thousands of attorneys thrive in the legal profession. We know what it takes to succeed in the world’s best law firms and are committed to doing what we can to ensure that every new associate has all the tips and tools he or she needs to excel during the critical first year of practice.

In this guide, we have compiled our most important articles that focus on the keys to success as a first-year associate!

First-Year Survival Cheat Sheets

The following three articles break out in the simplest possible terms all the essential advice you need to make it through your first year as a new associate. We cover some of these topics in more depth later in this guide, but these easy-to-read and understand survival cheat sheets will help you navigate the nuances of your new firm so you distinguish yourself as a cut above the rest.

- The Class They Didn’t Teach in Law School: Junior Associate 101
- Survival Tips for the First-Year Associate
- Top 10 Ways to Be a Good [New] Lawyer: Advice for Young Associates

Have a Game Plan

One of the best ways to succeed as an attorney in your first year as well as in your entire career is by having a game plan. The secret to success in any profession—and especially in the legal profession at top law firms—is by having a strategic long-term goal for what you want to accomplish and utilizing appropriate short-term tactics to achieve that goal. The following two articles discuss the importance of being both a strategic and tactical lawyer and of thinking of your career as a business and crafting a related business plan.

- Two Things the Most Successful 5% of Attorneys Do That the Rest Do Not
- Your Career Is Your Business. So What’s Your Business Plan?

Understand Law Firm Economics and Where You Fit In

Being an associate at a law firm is very different from being a law student at an academic institution. Law firms are businesses and to succeed in them you need to be much more than just book smart. You need to be productive and everything you do and the way you do it needs to be valuable to your firm.

The following articles provide an introduction to law firm economics, the business of law firms and what is expected of young attorneys. The first article covers the “billable hour” requirement that will form a major focus of your life from now on. The second article explains how law firms operate within a system of well-defined rules and the reasons why you need to play by those rules if you want to succeed.

The third article explains that although there are four types of lawyers practicing in large firms, most new associates are hired to be grinder attorneys. The article tells you how to be the best possible grinder attorney today so you maximize your options of moving up the ranks tomorrow and possibly even becoming a finder, minder or binder attorney later in your career.

- The "Systematic Reason" Why Most Attorneys Fail in Large, Prestigious Law Firms
The Four Types of Attorneys: The Finder, Minder, Binder and Grinder

Dress for Success

During your first year as a lawyer, you will be very busy learning the ropes and completing your assignments. A lot will be out of your control, but one thing you can control—and that will not only impress others but will elevate your own self-confidence—is how you dress. Whatever the purported dress culture of your firm is, we encourage all attorneys to dress for success, which is in a manner that conveys your respect for yourself, for your firm and for the institution of the law.

- Why You Should Dress Nicely as an Attorney Even When the Law Firm is Casual

The Importance of Being Well-Liked and of Networking

Never underestimate the importance of attitude. To succeed as a law firm associate, you must always have a positive attitude and strive to forge alliances and stay away from gossip and negativity. The following articles explain the importance of being well-liked in law firms and also the ways that even a busy first-year associate can make the time to engage in the kind of networking that will be invaluable to future success within the firm and legal community.

- The Importance of Being Well-Liked
- How to Successfully Network in a Law Firm

Appreciate Every Assignment

As a first-year associate, you have been hired as a grinder attorney and your job is to bill as many hours as possible. Even if you feel at times overwhelmed with assignments and deadlines, you must strive to welcome all assignments with a smile and with gratitude. As this article explains, work is the key to everything in your career, and eschewing assignments and taking work for granted could have seriously adverse consequences for your position at the firm as well as at any firm in the future.

- Take this Gift for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead

Find a Mentor

Finding a mentor can help you get past the rough patches in your first year and also help you in all sorts of ways in the future. This article explains how to go about finding the best mentor for you and your career.

- 11 Steps for Attorneys to Find Mentors (and Why Attorneys Need Mentors)

Characteristics to Cultivate

There are certain essential characteristics you will need throughout your legal career if you want to truly excel and rise to the top. The following articles discuss five such key characteristics that you can begin to appreciate and cultivate on your very first day of work: Confidence, Commitment, Motivation, Passion and Credibility.

- The Most Important Characteristic Attorneys Need to Succeed and Why It Is Almost Impossible for Them to Keep It
- The #1 Attorney Career Killer That Attorneys Are Never Taught
- The Most Important Lesson You Can Learn from Retiring Partners at Major Law Firms
- Why the Best Actors and Attorneys Are Exactly Alike
Credibility and Your Legal Career

Handling Common Problems

Two problems experienced by many first-year associates are responding to criticism in a productive manner and dealing with difficult partners. The following articles give you the tools you need to handle the situation if you find yourself facing criticism during your review or having to deal with especially difficult partners.

- Responding to Criticism: Survival Strategies
- Associate Stuck Working with Difficult Partners

Aspire to a Great Future

We hope your first year as a law firm associate is the beginning of an incredible and fulfilling journey through the legal profession. We want you to reach the very top of the industry one day, whether that is as a partner in the firm you are now just joining or doing something equally worthwhile in another firm or area of the legal system. These two articles recap key ways to succeed in the legal profession. We encourage you to set your sights as high as possible and do the necessary work each day, and at every stage of your career as you go forward, to turn that vision into reality!

- Top 10 Characteristics of Superstar Associates Who Make Partner
- 21 Pieces of Career Advice No One Gives Attorneys