

Everything an Attorney Needs to Know About Surviving in a New Law Firm (Culture, Dress, Socializing and More!)

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office

Summary: *This article covers the essentials—from socializing to work attire—of beginning your new law office job. If you think work is a meritocracy, ask yourself why some really smart people work really hard but never seem to get the recognition they deserve. If you think that everything you need to know about a place is written up in the policies and procedures, you're burying your head in the sand in a particularly dangerous way. As one attorney says, "Your most important time you accept the job is to learn the culture of the organization you are joining."*

The fact is that if you want to maximize your effort--if you want to work hours that are as reasonable as they can be and to have other people applaud you and give you opportunities and help you get ahead, if you want to smoke out the top and best people to work for--you've got to learn how the game is played. If you don't want to be the one always saying "How come she always gets the best projects?" and "What makes him so special?"--if you'd rather have people saying "Great job" about you--then pay special attention to everything I'm about to tell you. Superstars at the office aren't born. They are made. There are a subtle set of rules that you can apply, too.

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Now all of this may strike you as kind of skeezy. You may think, I just want to be myself. They'll have to take me as I am to you: No, they don't. When employers talk about finding a "fit," and only wanting people who "fit in," they don't mean it in a negative. They really mean: we want people who seem comfortable with our culture. I'm not telling you to do something against your nature. If you're at an office that's freewheeling, aggressive, and hard partying and where the lawyers are working twelve hours a day and then socializing together at night, and you're a more quiet, private person who wants to spend substantial time with your family, there's nothing wrong with either you or the office. But you don't agree with the culture, probably not the place for you to work.

I think you'll find that there's a fairly substantial range of places where you fit into the culture. Your goal should be to figure out what that culture is, and in doing so identify where there's wiggle room, the extent to which you can "be yourself." It's not a point in fighting it because you can't change the culture of an office all by yourself. Figure out how you can exploit the culture to your own benefit.

I'll give you an analogy from the world of science. Maybe you know about quantum mechanics, but if you don't, here's a simplified version: basically the science of really, really small stuff--atoms and subatomic particles. The problem is that these really don't behave like anything normal. For instance, subatomic particles don't have to be particles. Light, for example, can be a wave if it's measured like a wave, and as a stream of particles if it's measured as particles. And even more curiously, subatomic particles or waves don't necessarily exist at one point at a time. They can be at different points at the same time. Only measuring them makes them be anywhere specifically. When scientists first found this out they were totally baffled. But they learned to take advantage of the weirdness rather than fight it, and that led to a technology explosion and the miniaturization of everything from motors to microchips.

At work, you should do the same thing. Take advantage of the weirdness rather than fight it.

What is that "weirdness"? What are we talking about when we talk about "culture"? When you think of the word "culture," think of the rules, spoken and unspoken, by which a society lives. It's that way at work, too. What I'm going to do here is show you how to figure out what the rules are, and with those tools, what you ought to be looking for.

1. "Breasting Your Cards" Until You Know Who's Who and What's What

Until you've figured out how the office works, you've got to tread very carefully. Soon enough you'll be in the swim. But when you start, you want to be very cautious about everything.

a. Be very wary of people who try to "take you under their wing" from moment one.

You'll find at any office that there will be people you gravitate to more than others--and people who gravitate to you. You may find that you're the natural object of attention for your supervisor, the recruiting coordinator (if your office has one), or even like that. But if you notice somebody coming on strong to be your friend, tread lightly. It's tempting to fall into an instant friendship when you're at a strange new place, but you can't afford to do that. A whole bunch of people I interview warn you about this. Keep your antenna up! Many people when they go into new environments don't pay attention to the few people out to meet the boat. The ones with power were the ones standing on the shore watching. People who are new to the office you first may not have power. As one career services officer puts it, "The first person who tries to befriend you may be the most powerful of the office." Instead of clinging to anyone as a buddy, wait first to see how other people react to them. "Watch what other people say about them. How do they react when this person's name comes up? What kind of work do they get? Do other people seek them out? Does this person spend too much time chatting, passing along the latest office gossip, talking about lunches, or whining about things at work? You need to know how credible people are before you choose your friends in the office." One attorney adds, "You don't know who's important and who's not--and who'll stay and who won't! You can't befriend with someone, and six months later you're at their farewell lunch." If this sounds a bit cold, remember: your friend is your friend first, and your colleagues second. You can't afford to start off being associated in your superiors' minds with anybody who's got a bad reputation.

You might consider finding a mentor at your new workplace. For information about how to go about this process, [Steps for Attorneys to Find Mentors \(Why Attorneys Need Mentors\)>](#).

b. Don't establish a persona for yourself until you've got an idea of the lay of the land.

Elaine Bourne recommends that you "Watch, listen, and learn before you interject yourself into situations you know about." As lawyers at one firm advise, "Don't try to be the funniest or the most clever or be too visible early on. Lay low while!" You want to find out what goes on over big at the office, and what you ought to save for your private life, until you know to what extent you can "be yourself" at work.

c. Keep your opinions to yourself until you know whom you can trust, and how your statements will go over.

Bide your time. Find out who's who and what's what before you open your mouth about anything to anyone.

2. The "How" part--the tools you use to learn the culture

a. Listen to what people say when they don't think they're telling you rules.

If people are always saying "We should let Joe know about this," or "Let's see what Joe has to say," that means: v

b. Observe interactions.

See how people deal with each other, whether they're formal or freewheeling. If everybody at the office slinks into the office every day without saying anything and you sail into the office every day with a singing "Good mo-o-o-o-orning!" you're coming out in the wrong way. (And you're probably at the wrong kind of office for your personality!) Some places love practical jokes and silliness. If your supervisor is very serious, don't crack jokes!" If they have a newsletter that publishes silly photos of when they were children, that tells you about lightheartedness at work. Maybe the [managing partner](#) won't mind a little bit of whipped cream beard on his face at the firm's annual summer bash, but don't count on it until you've observed other people joshing with him the same way. At meetings, watch how people respond to the person who's talking. Do they tap their feet and roll their eyes? Or do they snap to attention and stop fiddling around?

c. Go out drinking with your fellow associates, and let them get hammered while you nurse a single beer.

As one new associate told me, "I made a point of going out for drinks with my colleagues when I first started. I'd nurse a single while they'd down several. They'd vent and spill the beans about [office politics](#) and all of the goings-on at work. It was invaluable information that saved my neck on several occasions."

d. Find a hobby that you share with colleagues at work, and use that as a source of bonding.

It can be anything. One attorney found that when she was working at the FTC, a group of people would go jogging every day. She liked to jog, so she joined them. One law firm told me about how some of the lawyers like to knit as a way to relieve stress, and several of the associates get together once a week to knit--and gossip. Another attorney says that when he was a new associate, he went running every lunch time with a group of associates and partners. He said, "We had a rule that we said would go any further than our running group. We'd run five or six miles, and while we were running, I heard a lot about what was going on in the firm. Partners would relax and talk about just about anything. They'd talk about who was going to make partner. A lot of times I knew who was going to partner before the people themselves knew it! I had colleagues who were jealous, knowing I was hearing a lot of inside scoop. I told them, 'Bring in your shoes and come with us!'"

On the other end of the "healthy habits" scale, one lawyer told me about how when he was a new associate, he and a few smokers in the office would all go out the same door to sneak a smoke a couple of times a day. "It turned out to be a great way to bond with my new colleagues," he said. "We'd all be out there huddling in the cold New England winters."

The point is that you need to think about what you like to do, and integrate that into your work life. It's a great way people, make friends--and learn what you need to know about the culture!

e. Heed the "myths and legends" at the office.

The 'myths and legends' at the office can help you out. If the managing partners of the firm shared a table in the first few years in the firm, you can learn that you'll want to hesitate before you demand new furniture. An oft-repeated female partner who called into the office within an hour of giving birth can give you a clue as to what lawyers will request for substantial paternity leave.

f. Pay more attention to what people do than what they say.

If they talk pro bono but reward huge billables, their actions are speaking louder than their words. If they say they're collegial and collegial, but everybody works behind firmly closed doors, they've got a different interpretation of "collegial" than you.

g. Ask questions, the right questions, of junior associates.

Encourage them to talk to you. "What do you wish you knew when you started here?" "How do you like what you're doing?" Those kinds of questions will give you all kinds of valuable tidbits. As lawyers at Jones Day point out, "Attorneys can provide more than you can provide not just substantial legal advice but also insights into the 'ins and outs' of the firm."

h. Look at your employer's web site and brochures.

See what they brag about. Your observations at the office will be more relevant. For instance, every employer brags about family friendliness, collegiality, whether or not that's accurate, but the way they present themselves to the outside world can give you a clue to how they like to think of themselves.

i. Ask the people at the top.

Lawyers at Steptoe and Johnson advise that you "Go to senior partners, make a conscious effort to seek them out and ask them what they did when they started that got their career off to a good start." What they did will tell you what they're seeing you do.

j. Identify positive role models.

Ask the recruiting coordinator or a mentor you trust, "Who's a superstar? Who should I try and emulate? What should I do like them?" Find positive role models and then do as they do!

k. Encourage people to talk to you.

Smile and look interested when they talk about work. Don't be judgmental, don't say "I would never have done that" or "That seems like the type who..." Just let them talk. You get to listen--and learn.

l. Watch how people treat their underlings.

If they treat them well, that's a big positive. On the other hand, no matter how nice they are to you, if they treat people poorly, you are in no position to talk back, then what they're telling you is that given the authority, they'd treat you like dirt, too.

m. Be nice to everybody:

It's not just the attorneys who can tell you valuable things. Secretaries, paralegals, and support staffers in general have valuable information about the office. Encourage them to clue you in!

n. Listen to gossip!

That's right. I know that the standard advice you hear is "avoid gossip," but that's not what people really mean. No one wants to be tagged as a gossip anyway. Gossip is very valuable. The jungle drums teach you things you can't learn anywhere else. What people really mean is to avoid being tagged as a gossip. Even senior partners listen to the grapevine. If you want to "think like a partner," you need to stay plugged in, too! Malicious gossip has no place in business. But you have to stay informed about what's going on in the firm. Any partner would want to know immediately were a lateral coming to the firm, or an associate leaving. Why should an associate be any less interested? Don't sit in your office with your head in the sand! Here's what you need to know about handling gossip:

1) Stay on the good side of office gossips.

You need to know the scoop. And you don't want malicious gossip to be circulated about you. That means that you absolutely do not want to be considered a gossip yourself, you need to know what's being said! You do need a good working relationship with your acquaintances at work, especially if you're not much into office politics. You have to tap into somebody who is. People are in the grapevine love to share! However, you don't want to appear too buddy buddy with a gossip, because you could lose your credibility that way.

2) Pass along "constructive gossip"--gossip if it will help the subject of the gossip or the person you're telling.

As the recruiting coordinator at one large firm said, "I get a lot of good information from associates. I find out if someone is unhappy or having a little trouble. Once a summer associate's father was really sick. He tried to keep it out of the office. The associate told me about it, and I took steps to have the summer associate transferred to another office so he could be closer to his dad."

I always make a point of telling people when I've heard good things about them. It's lovely being the bearer of good news, and people love to know that nice things are said about them behind their backs. If you know two colleagues who don't get along, you can get one of them to say something nice about the other--"There must be something you like about Bluto"--and a complimentary comment along to Bluto will go a long way toward smoothing things over and making your office a lot more harmonious for everyone.

3) Keep malicious gossip to yourself.

This is the gossip people are talking about when they say "avoid spreading gossip." Don't pass along anything that is personally destructive. Lots of people spend time at work criticizing or making fun of other people. Don't succumb to it. It makes you look bad. Don't be the first to know who's crying, who's cheating, who got a bad review, or anything like that. Keep it to yourself, and if anyone asks you, "Hey, did you know..." say "Oh, really?" Don't answer!

4) Pay attention to the source before you act on gossip.

Information isn't power. Acting on information is power. But only act on it after you validate it, and only if it impacts your business. It suggests that you "put anything you hear through your filtration system." Let's say that you hear that your firm is in trouble. Pay attention to the departure of rainmaking partners, bonuses that are suspiciously small or nonexistent for prior years, changes in hiring patterns, those kinds of things.

When the gossip concerns what somebody in the office is like, file it away. Everybody speaks from his or her own perspective. When they recount conversations to you, they're remembering what's relevant to them, not necessarily what was said. Ronna Lichtenberg says in her wonderful book *Work Would Be Great If It Weren't For The People*, "To figure out

remember that facial expressions are revealing, as is body language. A shrug. A lifted eyebrow. A roll of the eyes.

Also remember that everything you hear about someone else is an opinion. If someone tells you, "Alex is really a [redacted]" and your own experience with Alex is pretty positive, all it tells you is that the person who made the schmuck ass [redacted] doesn't like Alex. That might be valuable information, but it shouldn't determine your own assessment. When people give their opinion of someone, ask why they think that. Maybe they'll say "He's arrogant" or "He never shuts up," which are valuable behavioral cues for yourself around the person giving you their opinion. The bottom line is, be careful of people on the basis of other people's opinions, because if you start believing what they say, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. You get an assignment from Alex, and every time Alex does something you don't like, you say, "Aha! He's a schmuck!" As Georgetown's Marilyn Tucker says, "Listen to other people's opinions but form your own conclusions." People are certainly difficult people in every organization, don't base your behavior toward anybody on someone else's. Form your own judgments, and be open to each person. Don't get off to a poor start because of political naiveté!"

SMART ATTORNEY TRICK

Female lawyer wants to leave private practice and work for the state legislature. The only person who gives her a job is somebody reputed to be a terrible screamer. After some thought, she decides to take the offer. For whatever reason, the "terrible screamer" takes a liking to her. He never screams at her, and after she's been working for him for a year, he says, "You're doing a great job for me, but to advance your career you really should move on to something else. I'll help you find it." As she says, "Reputation doesn't tell you for sure how things will be for you. People press each other's buttons differently."

o. Take note of physical evidence of what's acceptable.

Toys on people's desks, children's artwork in attorneys' offices (particularly female attorneys), cues like that can tell you about how people at work feel about individuality and family issues. One recruiting coordinator points out that "If you see reading material at the office is the novels of Pearl S. Buck, it's not exactly going to be forward-thinking on women's issues."

p. Listen for euphemisms.

"We like to work hard and play hard" means "We put in lots of hours."

3. What to look for...

a. Hours! Law Is Not A Nine To Five Job, Unless You Work Part Time--In Which Case, It Is A Nine To Five Job

As is true with everything else at work, when you're talking about the hours you have to put in, you're talking about perception. It's not whether or not you're putting in the hours. It's whether or not the people you work for perceive you as working as much as they expect you to work. Image counts.

SMART ATTORNEY TRICK

Junior associate at a large Washington, D.C. law firm. He gets all of his work done and works pretty long hours. He has one particular partner, Partner Sundown--not one that he works for--makes a habit of strolling the halls at 10 p.m. to see who's still working. One night, the junior associate has to race out of the office to help a friend at around midnight, leaving a cup of coffee on his desk, his glasses next to the coffee, and his jacket on his chair. He never gets back to the office that night. The following morning, his supervising partner congratulates him, saying that "Partner Sundown said you were working late last night." The junior associate is confused, knowing that he wasn't in the office for Partner Sundown's "sweep." Then he realizes what happened: Partner Sundown saw his coffee, glasses, and jacket, and assumed he was still there and had just stepped out of his office for a moment.

Thereafter, he makes a point of leaving a pair of glasses, a half-full cup of coffee, and a jacket on his chair every

SMART ATTORNEY TRICK

Junior associate at a small firm. He's married and has a baby. He shares an office with a new associate whose wife has her pharmacist's degree out of state. The office mate is a really good guy: he's smart, funny, and hardworking. The office mate is from out of town and has nothing else to do, his work is his life. He's at the office all the time. The partner is commenting on the disparity between the hours the two junior associates put in. When the junior associate mentions her career services director at school, she recommends, "Why don't you invite this guy to have dinner with you and your family periodically? Introduce him to your friends? You'll never shine next to him otherwise." The junior associate does so, and it works like a charm.

BCG ATTORNEY SEARCH CAREER ADVICE

Female summer clerk at a large firm down South. The firm's library opens onto a large rooftop sun deck. She takes advantage of the sun deck for a tanning session every day at optimal tanning hours. She sits outside in a bikini, slathers her skin with suntan lotion, and relaxes for two hours. The associates and partners who go through the library can clearly see her beauty through large picture windows. When the recruiting coordinator gently suggested to her that perhaps the firm wasn't giving her the right image, she huffily replied, "Look at my time sheets. I'm meeting the billable hours you want me to work. I can manage my own time." She is not invited back.

1) Figuring out when you really have to be there. It's different from place to place, and supervisor to supervisor.

I get a lot of questions asking me for places with "reasonable" hours. That's a tough question to answer, because there are some generalities that are valid, they're not true a hundred percent of the time. For instance, it's generally true that if you work for the government, your hours will tend to be shorter than if you work for private firms. But if you're in litigation, whether it's for the Justice Department or the SEC or anywhere else, you'll work a lot. If you're an assistant district attorney, you'll be in on the weekend. It's also generally true that you tend to work shorter hours in a smaller firm than a larger one. But again, that's not always the case. In a nutshell, the hours you work are a cultural thing.

How do you figure them out? The same as with every other element of culture: Watch, learn, emulate. A big issue is the idea of "face time." "Face time" basically means, when do they have to see your face at the office? Some places have no such thing as face time. But you can't know that for sure until you see how they behave. An employer might say, "I don't care when you work as long as you get the work done," but I promise you, if you worked a graveyard shift from 11 p.m. to 8 a.m., you'd be out of there like--well, you know what. Here are a few guidelines to figuring out when you really have to be at the office.

For more information about billable hours, see [this link](#).

a) If you've got a deadline--or a partner--breathing down your neck, stay until the work gets done.

Even places that genuinely don't seem to require any given set of hours agree about that. If it means an occasional late night at the office until 3 a.m., that's what it means. If a partner walks into your office with a new assignment at 6 p.m. and says, "Stay until tomorrow," then stay until it gets done. (Don't assume that your efforts won't be appreciated, by the way. One junior associate at one of the country's largest law firms told me that after putting in long hours on a court case, her partner walked in the day before Thanksgiving, and said, "See you next year." When she asked what he meant, he said, "You've worked hard enough. Take off. Go see your family. See you after New Year's." And he meant it.)

b) If you are assigned to a supervisor, be at the office when (s)he's there. That's it.

As you get more seniority, you'll have more control over your schedule. But when you're new, be there when the work for is there. "If your partner is looking for you at 7 p.m. and you're not there, your workload will suffer," commented a senior associate.

recruiting coordinator. The partner at one [large firm](#) talked about how when he was a junior associate, he was as partners. One of them would arrive at 7 a.m., and the other never left before 8 p.m. He made sure he was there for it. "It meant long days, but it paid off in the long run."

c) Watch how junior associate "superstars" handle their time, and emulate them.

Pay careful attention to how people react when a junior associate at the office brags about how "I spent the whole day here" or "I was here until mid-night." It may be that people grumble behind the braggart's back, "He doesn't know how to manage his time," or "She's not impressing anybody with those hours. She doesn't have the work to justify it."

d) Err on the side of staying a little bit longer than you think you have to, at least at first.

If all of the junior associates leave between 6:30 and 7:30, leave at 7:30. And when you're new, don't leave without checking in around the office first. As Ham- line's Vince Thomas recommends, "If most of the people are gone, go. If everyone is still here, don't leave without asking if you can help anyone before you go home."

e) Be aware of any "face time" requirements.

What I mean is, ask around to see if there are any times when you're expected to be at work regardless of whether you have work or not--that is, when they expect to see your face. Talk to junior associates and/or your mentor to see what's appropriate. At one office, some junior associates told a new associate, "We have to stay until 6:30 or 7." When the new associate asked why, they shrugged and said, "We just have to." If you get that response, then it means you have to stay, as well.

At a lot of firms, Saturday morning is "face time." As one lawyer recommended, "Saturday mornings are good for you because no one is around. It's a good time to catch up." Another lawyer commented that "At our firm, the board members come in on Saturday for board meetings. Junior associates would make a point of being at the office so the board could see them. It didn't much matter if all you were doing was cleaning your desk or talking with people. But it was important. Sometimes you'd get a plum assignment because a board member bumped into you on a Saturday. Once in a while they'd handed something and they'd say, 'I need this Monday,' so you just gave up your weekend. But it was a good idea to be there at least some of the time."

At one large firm, the managing partner had a habit of coming in on Sunday mornings to see which associate made it. The office had mail in them. The mail on Saturdays was delivered at 9 a.m., and if an associate had mail in his or her office, the managing partner would know they hadn't been in--and he wouldn't be happy. So associates without any work to do would come in at 9:15, pick up their mail, and leave. Other firms have situations that echo that. At one firm, a "psychotic" partner required that his associates come in on Saturday morning from 8:30 until noon. When one of them protested, "But I have no work, why come in?" "Because there's so much to learn!" he'd respond. He himself didn't come in on Saturdays, but he would sometimes call to see who picked up the phone. The associates would dutifully come in with their breakfast, eat it, read the paper, and leave.

f) If you're expected to show up once in a while on a weekend, try to be there when other people are there.

It doesn't really count as face time if nobody sees your face! But if you've made the effort and nobody was there, mention it to people. At lunch on Monday, you might want to work into the conversation, "When I was here on Saturday, I saw [name]. Remember, only do that if coming in on weekends is considered a good thing."

g) Don't routinely put in time when your supervisor isn't there just to say you did it.

After a while--and it's impossible for you to distinguish at first--you learn to tell the difference between real emergencies and false ones. If people expect you there every night and every weekend, you'll soon be loaded down with work because you figure you live there. As I talk about in the section called "Balance," over the long haul you just can't physically work that hard every day.

of hours, and developing a reputation as a workaholic won't help you.

h) Don't make a habit of coming in late, even if you're a night owl.

If everybody else is in the office by 9:00 and you routinely wander in at 10:30, you'll be regarded as a slacker even if it's true. A junior associate at one large firm said that "There's a perception here that people who come in after nine--work until midnight--are lazy. It's a mistake to think that people who come in the earliest are the hardest workers, but the partners seem to believe it. They all comment about it. So I make sure to come in before the partners arrive. They don't care how late you stay; they don't comment about that. It's just your arrival time they notice. They're always telling me how productive and hard-working I am, even though I'm perfectly in line with everyone else. I've just moved my schedule to 9:00 hours." At another firm, the junior associates were expected to work from 8 in the morning until 8 at night, which is when the partners were there. One junior associate had a horse, and wanted to leave at 5 o'clock every day to ride her horse. To compensate, she came in to work at 5 a.m. On her evaluations, her superiors dinged her for not being there three days a week when everybody else was there.

i) If you work in an environment where the supervision is very lax, make a special attempt not to succumb to the temptation of bailing out early.

As one lawyer commented, "At our firm, we get a lot of freedom over when we come in and when we leave. Most of the junior associates and partners aren't on your back. We've had summer clerks who've taken that too far. We had one clerk who wouldn't bother to come back to work after lunch. Or he'd leave in the middle of the afternoon. Literally, he'd work from 9 to 12 hours a day and then show up at firm events. His mentor didn't even know. It's just a bad habit. Even if nobody's watching you, you have to be a grown-up, because ultimately your career depends on what you do."

j) If you're unassigned (or you want to switch supervisors), find out when the person you want to work for is in the office and make sure you're there, too.

As one junior associate said, "I was just dying to work for a sports lawyer at our office. I found out from his secretary that he regularly came to work between eight and ten in the morning on Saturdays. So I started doing that, too, and I made sure he saw me. We'd chat casually, and then, because I was just about the only associate there that early on Saturdays, he started giving me work. Now he's my supervisor."

k) Ignore the hours you worked as a summer clerk.

That wasn't real life. This is. Pay attention to what junior associates actually do, not what the party line is.

If you're serious about advancing your career at your firm--which I'm sure you are--see .

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Junior associate at a large Midwestern firm: "In some firms, 'family friendly' means you get Christmas off. I clerked at a firm and they sold me a bill of goods about how they're a 'lifestyle' firm, they're family friendly. That's really important to me because I have a wife and two small children. In fact, during the summer they would send me home at 6 p.m. even if I wanted to stay. When I came back as a permanent associate, I stuck with those hours. I was getting my work done. But then I heard the grapevine that my supervising partner wasn't happy with me, not because of my work, but because of what he perceived as my poor work ethic. I was stunned. The lesson is this: Realize that even if a firm tells you its 'family friendly,' that doesn't mean a 9 to 5 workday. No one will pay you more than \$50,000 a year to start without expecting you to work the hours it takes to get the job done to their satisfaction."

2) How to be visible when you're invisible.

We live in a wired age--actually, a wireless one. It's possible to work from just about anywhere. If people at your work on weekends and you take your work home with you, you run the risk of not getting sufficient credit for it because they see you working. The solution? One Florida lawyer says, "Even if you're working at home, out on the deck, you can send a message across that you're putting in the hours in a lot of subtle ways. You can return e-mails on Saturday at noon, return voice mails on Sunday night. That way, people will know you're working even if they don't see you."

3) Make sense of the hours, and you won't resent them so much.

If you're expected to put in long hours, it's easy to become resentful. It helps to think about the why of those hours.

First of all, as many lawyers pointed out, law is a client-driven business. As lawyers at one large Florida firm suggest, "Typically, clients are not willing to pay lawyers until the problem has become severe, and then they expect their undivided immediate attention." Another attorney adds, "The word 'injunction' means 'they need it tomorrow.' It's an all-nighter." Another attorney echoes that, saying, "Nobody lies and tells you it's a 9 to 5 job. It's all client-driven. If they need stuff Saturday, they need it!"

There's a huge temptation to knock off at 3 p.m. on Friday, after working hard all week. But the problem is that the big issues come in. It's often when the clients panic, so you have to be there. Despite your best-laid plans (and the advice of your supervisor), there may be times when you are called in to work unexpectedly because a client needs you. You may have to change evening and weekend plans with no notice. Let people know where you can be reached when you're away from the weekend. Usually they won't bug you unless there's an emergency, but it makes you look good." Secondly, remember that the hours you put in are an investment in yourself. You need to put in the time not just to get the skills, but to earn your way. If you ever think you might want to work part time or get parental leave, you won't be able to if you haven't built up a reputation at the firm, first. And that takes hard work. In your earliest days with an employer, you're building a reputation for yourself. If you show up early for work the first few months that you are there and drop in on weekends, you can ease up after that. If you've established yourself as a 'weekend warrior' or an 'early bird.'

Thirdly, when you're torqued about long hours, remember that "There's a relationship between what you're paid and what you have to produce," says one attorney. If you want them to show you the money, you've got to show them the work.

Remember also that not all hours are created equal. Long hours don't necessarily mean that you're killing yourself. Some hours lead to sundown. As a new associate, a lot of what you do doesn't take a lot of thought. Those hours aren't as tiring because you aren't using as much brain power. And you can minimize your time at the office by making sure that when you are there, you're being efficient. The most important thing is that you give them high-quality work. If you spend two hours reading something on the Internet and then realize you have tons of work to do, then you're spending more time at the office than you have.

4) What to do when you're away from the office during the day.

When you leave the office during the day, Minnesota's Nora Klaphake recommends that you "Let others know what you're working on and where you are. Announce loudly enough for several people to hear that you are going to court or to meet a client outside the office. That way they don't assume that you are out playing golf or shopping for an afternoon."

b. Who's got the juice?

Many lawyers point out that at every firm, there are partners whose associates "never make partner." Some partners are powerful but they really aren't; others may seem timid and out of the loop but they're actually highly valued and well-respected. When you start, you may have a perception that so-and-so seems to be a lame duck. They don't seem to do a lot of work, but they're not boisterous, and when they come to you, you may be telling yourself that their work isn't as important. But don't be fooled! You need to know what the power structure really is.

In every organization, some people will be more powerful than others, even if you can't identify them immediately.

recruiting coordinator put it, "You can smell the fear when certain people walk down the hall." Use your "cultural" tools to figure out who's really got the juice.

Watch who hangs out with whom. At meetings, see how people respond to the person who's talking. The one who speaks up at the time may not be respected, but people may really sit up and take notice when a person who's usually quiet takes the floor. Some lawyers are very quiet and very well- respected. See who lawyers go to for advice and information. That's the person they think has sound judgment. And of course, listen for people's comments about the people they work with!

How should you use this information? If you don't know what you want to do, find a well-respected partner and work with her. You'll have a good experience. You need to know who not to cross! It might be an attorney, an office manager, or a support staff member. The title doesn't count. The influence does.

Also, use your cultural tools to see if your supervisor is powerful. Watch when you mention his/her name to other people. Watch their reactions--enthusiastic? Noncommittal? Sympathetic? And listen to how they respond. If you haven't been a star, you need to use tools to advance your career.

c. Tips on working for your supervisor

You need to understand the importance of gathering intelligence on working for a new supervisor. For instance, find out if you can get advice from other associates who've worked for your supervisor before. If your supervisor has likes, dislikes, or a reputation, you want to know that before you make a mistake.

SMART ATTORNEY ADVICE

Female associate at a small firm says, "I was warned shortly after starting my job that if one particular partner fired me, I shouldn't pack my things--he fired every associate at one time or another. Sure enough, he stormed into my office and fired me over something stupid. I ignored it, and he calmed down. If I hadn't heard about his reputation ahead of time, I would have been devastated."

d. Socializing expectations

You need to fit in. You can't lock yourself away. Be social! You need to watch to see exactly what's expected of you.

Watch for behavior cues at work. Do people eat lunch at their desks? Do they go out together? Do they work out? Figure out what's going on by looking carefully around you. Don't isolate yourself and don't hang out exclusively with the support staff or your age peers!"

One career services director told of a student who called her, telling her he'd received an [offer from](#) a great firm. His only contact thus far had been interviews at the office. The managing partner had sent him a letter inviting him to the firm's golf outing. The letter included the line, "We know you may not golf, I don't, but I participate every year." The student asked the career services director, "Do I really have to go? I've got to study for the Bar exam. And I don't golf!" She responded, "Absolutely! You should tell them that you're really excited about it, but you've never held a golf club." He protested. She continued, "You don't know if this is an event you can blow off. The tone of the letter suggests that every lawyer in the firm goes. If they all do it, you can't turn down the invitation."

e. The financial health of your employer

If you work for the government, we all fervently hope that your employer is financially sound. If you are at a private firm, you can never be sure. Your employer almost certainly won't say anything officially if things are going bad. You have to use your cultural tools--and your good sense--to figure it out for yourself.

If you start your career with a large firm where you're making big money to start, you need to be especially vigilant in financial matters. Skyrocketing salaries are creating an upheaval in the entire business of law. [American Lawyer](#) article, under the headline "Eat Our Young," that proposed that the answer is not to hire first year associates at all. The fact is, there are a lot of partners who are plenty pissed off about high starting salaries. You've got to keep your eyes open to see their potential effect on your firm. As the senior partner at one firm told me, "If profits at a firm lag behind [compensation to partners gets reduced, partners leave and take their book of business with them](#). Yeah, they're making money anyway. But if they perceive they can make more without having to cut in new associates with big salaries. So don't be seduced by the mahogany paneling and lush surroundings into thinking that nothing can rock your world. Be vigilant!

One career services director told how she had two students spend the summer at a firm. Neither got an offer at the end of the summer. When she called the firm to ask why, the firm said, "Their skills were bad." She knew the students and was suspicious of this answer. On top of that, she knew that the firm had been shrinking for two years. Sure enough, six months later, it closed.

One of the people we spoke with was an associate at Finley, Kumble--a firm that was the third largest law firm in the country in the 1980's. It collapsed in a spectacular fashion, described in the book, Shark Tank. The former associate said, "The firm put out press releases, held press conferences saying that 'The rumors are totally unfounded, the firm is not going under.' I got a memo in October to all of the attorneys in the firm, denying the rumors, saying that 'Rumors that we are going to close are absolutely false,' all underlined and in caps. The firm closed two months later. The lesson I learned was this: Always have a point of knowing a nosy person in the know who can keep you abreast of things. Merger deals, financial status, the fact that partners are leaving. Even if you don't get involved, listen! If the firm is going under, they won't tell you officially but you'll be afraid you'll jump ship. But if you don't listen, you're stuck for two reasons: (1) you're stuck with more work because the people who do know and are jumping ship, and with the extra work you don't have the time to look for another job. When you finally figure it out, all of the other people who didn't listen are figuring it out, too, and you've got a ton of competition for jobs."

For more information about [making a lateral career move](#), see .

SMART ATTORNEY TRICK

Associate at a large East Coast firm in the early 1990's. It's a matter of "speculation"--a/k/a gossip--that "We're all going to be laid off." The firm line is, "We're not laying off anyone." The associate says, "I hear that, and then I look at my personal expenses and see I'm not billing enough to support my salary. Econ 101 tells me that I'm not staying." Some of the associates bring up the unsubstantiated rumor at the next firm-wide meeting. The partners angrily stand by their public statements, and with great displeasure being embarrassed by the associates who bring up the matter in public. The associate says, "Shortly after, I get a review that's particularly ugly. The quality of my work hasn't changed, and I'm working for the same partner as in the past. I realize: they're setting me up. They're laying the groundwork for getting rid of me." He immediately finds a new job. And shortly after he left, many of the associates were, in fact, laid off.

f. The circumstances of associates leaving the employer before you got there.

Listen carefully when people talk about associates who were forced out before you arrived. The fact is, different people have different sensitivities about different things. For some of them, getting drunk and passing out at a partner's party got you cashiered on the spot. At others, it wouldn't. Even though firms are hyper-conscious of sexual harassment is still a problem. Certain partners at certain places who are so powerful that if they harass a female associate, the partner will stay in the firm and the female associate will be forced out. If you're a woman, it's extremely important to know if there are men like that at the firm you can avoid them at all costs. The bottom line is, see what's killed others at the office, so that you can avoid the same fate.

g. Attitudes about pro bono work.

Every law firm will publicly herald its dedication to pro bono work. The truth may be very different. The only way to know what your employer really thinks of pro bono is by using your culture tools.

Watch carefully and see how pro bono is treated. As one lawyer points out, "Pro bono commitment varies. Some firms are committed. At others, it's your own personal obligation." Another lawyer added that, "At many big firms, there's one person who does all the pro bono, but the credit is spread out." The hiring partner at one large firm lamented that, "Pro bono work, and it makes new associates believe that in everything we do, we're on the side of the 'right.' That's not realistic, and if they looked more closely, they'd realize that."

h. Handling billables.

Recording your time is an art that varies to some extent from employer to employer. I could probably have told you more here. It would fit.

i. Handling expense reports.

You need to learn what's appropriate to charge to the office, and what isn't. This is very much a cultural matter; different employers feel differently about different items. The easiest thing to do is to ask the recruiting administrator, hiring manager, or your supervisor before you submit your expense report. Do not expect the firm to reimburse you for everything you exceed the budget for recruiting dinners and the like, don't just submit the expense statement and hope for the best. A little public relations. Go see the recruiting administrator to explain the situation and let her know that you don't expect to be reimbursed or why this particular dinner got out of hand. Being up front goes a lot further than hoping something will work out. Someone will notice, and you don't want it to be the managing partner.

For long trips, ask--how many days can you travel before submitting a dry cleaning charge, or shoe shine, or hair salon. Err on the side of conservatism. And be aware that guidelines for meals are different for associates than they are for partners.

j. Perceptions of you.

You need to keep your finger on the pulse of what's being said about you. When somebody brings you bad news, don't shoot the messenger.

When people have a negative opinion of you, they will be hesitant to say things to you directly--but they probably won't be shy about saying things behind your back. Schmucks! When those comments come to your attention, keep two things in mind: 1) The messenger's motivation in telling you. Don't betray any emotion. Use your perceptions of your contact and the speaker to see how much credence to give to the comment. 2) Remember that anybody's perception is just that: a perception. It tells you only what the speaker thinks of you at the moment they made the comment. Don't take it personally. Perceptions can change perceptions.

One associate at a firm in the Midwest talked about an experience he had when he started to work. "I had just finished a client letter I ever wrote. My secretary, Tanya, brought it in, and I signed it. She asked, 'Would you like a copy?' She had a heavy Boston accent, and I thought she said 'Coffee.' So I responded, 'I'd love a coffee! Thanks. I take it light with cream.' She angrily responded, 'I'm not your slave!' and stormed out of my office. I was totally confused. Another secretary came fifteen minutes later, and said, 'How could you say that to Tanya? Secretaries here don't bring coffee to their bosses.' I had my head out of the Fifties. Nobody will work for you if you have an attitude like that.' Thank God she said something to me that gave me a chance to straighten things out with Tanya, and with all of the other secretaries who had daggers out for me."

k. How to Look the Part.

Your clothes have always said a lot about you. When you become a lawyer, you want your clothes to say what you want your clients, and everybody else you have contact with professionally will expect them to say. Here's what to do to make sure they do.

you look the part:

1) Until you figure out the dress code at work, wear what you wore to interviews--as long as you dressed conservatively for those!

Your temptation might be to buy a whole new wardrobe before you start working. That makes sense only if you've spent time with the employer previously, either with a clerkship or with some casual visits or, in the case of prosecutors, in the courtroom ahead of time and watching them work. You can also buy a wardrobe before you arrive at the office and talk it down first with the recruiting coordinator or hiring partner to ask about what's appropriate. Otherwise, have just a few "interview" outfits, and hold off on any major purchases. The reason you should do this is that if you buy ahead of time, you might be buying something, totally innocently, that's wrong for the office culture. Either that, or you'll buy an entire wardrobe that's too conservative, when you might find out that there's a lot more leeway for individuality at your office. You can add livelier clothes to your conservative interview wear once you've learned the uniform at work. You never get caught dressing too conservatively when you start! If you're too risky you'll stand out for all the wrong reasons. Law is a conservative profession. Your initial impression will be a lasting one. You want to be remembered for your intelligence and ability, not the length of your skirt, your hairstyle or your make-up." "When you're new, you don't want to wear anything that will make people talk about you.

For information about what you should wear to your [law firm interview](#), see [here](#).

2) Watch what other people wear to work--and know what to watch for.

Do you remember the scene in "Men In Black" when Rip Torn says to Will Smith, "Time to put it on. The last suit you wore," and hands him a black suit? Well, work isn't likely to be that strict. But as a new lawyer, you are going to be wearing something of a uniform. And that uniform will be decided by people in your office. Here's what you want to watch for:

a) I've already told you to keep an eye--and ear--out for the most respected junior associates. Wear what they wear.

b) Be aware that different kinds of employers have different quirks. One attorney recounts her own experience as a lawyer on Capitol Hill. She says, "I figured I couldn't go wrong if I wore a conservative blue suit to work. I didn't realize that on the Hill, pages wear blue suits. I couldn't figure out what was going on when everybody handed me envelopes. Turns out I was a page, not a lawyer!"

c) If you are working in a part of the country that's new to you, be especially adept at picking up clues about local sartorial norms are. People mentioned this to me all over the country. In New York and Los Angeles, you can wear more fashion* forward. At a lot of employers in those cities, a man can get away with a four-button suit that wouldn't fly in more conservative places. In Texas, women are expected to wear more makeup. In the Pacific North-west, just the opposite: a more natural look is the norm. These are of course generalizations, but the point is this: be sensitive to geographic differences in styles if you're in a new place.

d) Be aware that some people in every office dress inappropriately. Be more conservative than the wildest dresser you see. Don't take your dress cues from the support staff! As one attorney in the San Diego City Attorney's Office says, "For the most part, the shortest skirts are too short; the most casually dressed are too casual; the most rumpled suits are too rumpled. If you're at the outer margins of attire in your office, you need to move toward the center. When you find yourself defending your style by comparing it favorably to what somebody else in the office wears, remember how impressed the highway patrol officer was when you say, 'But Officer, others were going faster than me.'"

Furthermore, remember that more experienced lawyers have more leeway to dress more individualistically. Because they are more powerful, they have a bargaining chip that you don't have as a new lawyer. When you've earned some juice, you can wear a red leather miniskirt, too (unless you're a man, in which case that's probably never a good idea no matter how powerful you get).

e) Pay more attention to what people in your office wear than you do to articles about what lawyers are supposed to wear. One Mississippi attorney tells the following story: "I saw an article one day in a national legal magazine that said men should only wear shoes that lace up, not slip-ons of any kind. It was during on-campus interview season. Within about six male interviewers came into my office the next day, the magazine was on my desk. As we all walked out, one of the men asked me if I had read the magazine on my desk. I told him I had, and said, 'It was interesting to see what the magazine said men should only wear tie-up, wingtip-like shoes.' We all found ourselves immediately looking down at every shoe. It turns out, none of them were wearing the shoes the article had said were mandatory. All of them had on very nice shoes. I told them jokingly that since they weren't dressed appropriately, they should go home and change!"

Articles tell you only about what the reporter who wrote the article was told by whomever (s)he interviewed. If what you wear at your office belies any published source, follow what you see at work!

3) "... But Why Do I Have To Dress Like Everybody Else?"

The short answer is: you don't. Not all the time. At home, you can wear a tutu, scuba gear, and mukluks if it floats your boat. At work, you're a lawyer. And there are a bunch of good reasons for dressing like everybody else.

a) You want to be taken seriously as a lawyer by the people at your office.

If you don't look the part, you won't be. When people look at you, you don't want them to notice how short your skirt is, how expensive your suit is. If you dress provocatively, you'll have a hard time being taken seriously. Not only that, but you'll be perceived as insecure. You can't put your best foot forward if it's clad in a shocking pink five-inch heel!

BCG ATTORNEY SEARCH CAREER ADVICE

New female associate, large firm. She attends a meeting with other partners and associates. Everybody is shocked when she is wearing an "Ally McBeal" outfit with a very short skirt. She sits down, and to make matters worse, she does a leg kick. When the meeting is over, the buzz behind her back is about her bright yellow underwear--visible to everybody in the room.

If you're a female litigator, you have to start out playing by the rules if you want people to view you as capable. I suggest playing by the rules. In my mind, you earn the right to wear the candy apple red suit. Once you've been around a while, and you know what you are doing, it's all right to stand out. But when you're new, and you have no clue what you're doing or so where the heck the courtroom you need to be in is located, your major objective is to survive. You don't want to be remembered as the incompetent lawyer in the pink suit. The rules only change once you know what you're doing.

b) If you don't dress appropriately, people will question your professional competence.

It doesn't seem fair, but people draw conclusions about your abilities based on what you wear. They'll think, if you're not wearing the clothes right, what else are you messing up? It influences their opinion in ways they themselves may not even realize. An older attorney described a young female attorney as being "just so incompetent. And everything she owns is the color pink sherbet!" That's not the way you want to be viewed.

c) Your clients deserve to have a lawyer who dresses the way they expect lawyers to dress.

Even if your office has gone to "business casual" (and we're going to talk about that in a minute), remember that when you have contact with clients, casual wear doesn't fly. As one [Venable attorney](#) says, "I always wear a tie when I meet with clients. It's a respect thing." Another attorney says "When you're young, your clients have a hard enough time taking you seriously. You need to see yourself as a professional, and that means looking like a lawyer. You act more professionally when you dress appropriately."

When you have paying clients, they expect you to look like a worthwhile investment. If you were paying someone dollars an hour, wouldn't you want them to look the part? If you want to get a client to hire your firm and pay a ten dollar retainer, your stockings shouldn't have runs in them, your makeup should be on, and your nails should be look like a mess and can't present a good image, why should anyone think you could present a neat case?

If you are a public defender or otherwise work with low-income clients, take special care in what you wear when they come to our office, and think, 'Hey, here I am in this cool office in the public sector, there's nothing wrong with having my hair down to my waist.' It's not fair to their clients! They have a right to somebody who looks like a lawyer! You also want to be careful about flaunting your comparative wealth to your low-income clients.

You can't dress like a Junior Leaguer if you're a public defender." And one female lawyer adds, "When I deal with compensation clients or I'm doing pro bono work, I don't wear my diamond engagement ring. I was once trying to explain to a client why he should accept a rather paltry sum of money for his not-so-great case. He looked at my ring, and said, 'Look--I can't see you to understand my life.'"

4) Getting the hang of "business casual." It's not the same as "law school casual."

The legal profession is in an uproar about the concept of "business casual." The fact is that nobody knows what it means, and it differs from office to office. Here's some advice about how you should handle "business casual."

a) Ask!

The best advice on figuring out what to wear to a "business casual" office is to call ahead of time and ask the receptionist, coordinator, hiring partner, or anybody who interviewed you about what exactly is appropriate. As Arizona's Mary Jo says, "Ask what to wear. They'll appreciate that you bothered to ask!"

b) "Business casual" doesn't mean "law school casual."

Sport shirts and jackets, khakis, sweaters, pantsuits for women--that's all fine. Flip flops, T-shirts, jeans, shorts, leather jackets, and jewelry are not. If you see it on MTV, nobody should see you in it at the office. Bras, definitely. Visible bra straps, no. Don't go to work in the outfit in which you went clubbing last night. Other outfits recruiting coordinators have seen new associates wearing to work: beach wear, gardening outfits, and pajamas. Don't go there!

c) "Business casual" doesn't mean "cheap looking."

You still have to look great. You can get away with polyester, but it can't be plastic bag polyester. Shop at quality stores. See what their idea of casual is. Some firms even have in-house fashion shows from Brooks Brothers! Dickinson and Paine says that if you go to "Talbots, Brooks Brothers, stores like that--they have people who deal with 'business casual' every day."

d) Even at a business casual office, always have something formal at work in case you're called out of the office for business at a moment's notice.

If you're dressed casually, you will not be able to take up a senior attorney's offer to go to a client meeting, court filing, or a professional event. More senior attorneys tend to dress down on occasion, but that's because they know their schedule. They know when they are going to be going to court or meeting with clients. As a new associate, you don't have that kind of schedule mastery. If you're new, dress professionally or have something at the office to put on. A lawyer may call and say, "Who wants to come to this deposition with me?" or "Who wants to come to court with me?" If you aren't dressed appropriately, you miss the chance." The lawyer at a county attorney's office commented that one day when she was wearing a dress,

shawl, her boss ran into her office, and said, "I need someone to argue this case in the Second Circuit. Our advice is to dress you up here." The lawyer was mortified; she was dressed completely inappropriately for a court appearance. After that, she always kept formal clothes at work.

5) Your appearance isn't limited to the clothes you wear.

"Dress" is really shorthand for "appearance." Your appearance in general should be professional. At the risk of being redundant, you undoubtedly already know, there are lots of stylish accoutrements that don't fly when you're a lawyer. Body piercings, tattoos, have anything pierced that will show when you're wearing a suit. A pierced lip or tongue--no. Anything below your waist--no. Nobody will see it.

For men and women--no backpacks. Briefcases. You can bring in a briefcase even if it only contains lunch, sneakers, and a magazine!

For men--"Watches, shoes, and ties say it all," says Ronna Lichtenberg in *Work Would Be Great If It Weren't For Ties*. "Watches are basically sports cars on men's wrists." For women, watch what the other women at the office do with their hair and don't stray far from that. One recruiter in the Northeast commented on a summer clerk who came in with huge hair. "She looked like a banshee." If everybody else at the office has big hair, that's fine. But if they don't--reduce the volume. Also, nails. Keep them relatively short and well-groomed. No long, curved acrylics. No designs! Set up a regular manicure appointment for yourself. It's something that used to be an indulgence, but now that you're a professional, it's a necessity. For jewelry--wear nothing cheap or flashy. As for makeup--be natural looking (ie no lipsticks that take you on the color wheel away from the red family.) Save the blue lipstick for clubbing--or Halloween.

6) Figuring out what's de rigeur socially.

As is true with every other aspect of business dressing, you can't go wrong by asking what's appropriate. Whether it's a retreat or a semiformal affair, ask. One lawyer talked about showing up at his firm's annual retreat at a resort wearing a sweatshirt. "Everybody else was wearing khakis and polo shirts," he said. "I looked like I was there to swab the floors."

At more formal parties, it's easier for men than it is for women. For men, formal means a tux. A black tux; you don't want to look like Tom Hanks in "Big." (Rent it. It's funny.) Semi-formal means a suit and tie. For a holiday party, maybe a Christmas sweater. For women, formal means a long gown, and semi-formal means a headache.

Female attorneys are in a quandary when it comes to semi-formal wear. Do you 'look like a woman' in dressy attire, or 'look like a lawyer' in a suit? Ask other female lawyers at the office what's appropriate; ask them what they wear to the same events. Something like a tailored dress or "something a bit more flashy than what you wear to the office, but still businesslike. Stay away from something terribly sexy. As one lawyer commented dryly, "You don't want to go to a partner's party perceived as competition for his wife." If you wind up being overdressed, one etiquette guru suggests to follow her mother's advice, and say, "Excuse me, but we have another function to go to"--and pretend you dressed for that.

If you are going straight from work to a social function, that for men, you can wear exactly what you wore to work. For women, "You want to look a little more festive. Wear a shift under a suit coat to work. For the evening, add a bit of jewelry, a blazer, jacket, add a little more makeup, and change shoes."

7) Remember that you've got to rely on your powers of observation and answers to the questions you ask about what to wear.

Lawyers won't tell you you've dressed wrong, but they will notice and they will talk about it. As one lawyer pointed out, it isn't accidental. There are these wonderful things called mirrors. Think about the image you're creating."

1. Three situations where you should definitely ignore the culture and "do the right thing."

After telling you over and over again to follow the culture at work, there are three situations where you should absolutely positively ignore the culture and follow your better instincts. They are:

1) Ethics.

It's the culture of your firm to "bend" the rules of ethics and/or they encourage you to do so, get out before you're handcuffed. Under no circumstances "follow the herd" into ethical violations. (I address this in more detail under "Ethical Issues".)

2) Racist, sexist behavior.

Whether it's inappropriate jokes or discriminatory or harassing behavior, don't go there. Just don't. You don't want to be and/or sexist tag to dog you for your entire career, even if you were just going along with the pack.

3) Treating support staff badly.

Maybe your superiors treat the support staff like a rented mule. Don't you do it. It's inhumane and wrong. And it tells something very significant--and very bad--about the people you work for.

4. If you're African-American, here's some advice about starting your career from an experienced African-American attorney.

I'm not African-American. My heritage is British and Indian. So half of my ancestors oppressed the other half. They can't possibly know what it's like to be African-American. But many people I interviewed pointed out to me that not only do people of color face a host of issues that white lawyers don't, but so do people of different genders.

For advice on this issue, I turned to an African-American [senior associate](#) at a large Midwestern firm. He is often asked to address race and gender issues for groups of law students and new practitioners. Here's his advice for you.

"As an African-American associate at a large firm, realize that starting at a large firm is tough for everybody. You can't tell yourself, 'Everybody has it easier than me.' You're only making it harder for yourself. Don't be bitter. Don't feel like 'I'm not being treated fairly here.' In that sense color is no different than gender. You can't be bitter and miserable. You have to be serene. Don't draw energy away from what's already a difficult task. If you get swallowed up by anger, you won't care. They'll just say that you're another associate who didn't make it. You can't be distracted by things that are not your business if you want to succeed.

"It helps if you find a social niche. Find a situation where color or gender isn't an issue. Find golf, tennis, aerobics, a book club. Get yourself into situations where distinctions disappear; get to know people on a fundamental level to transcend the race and gender barrier.

"As an African-American lawyer, use warmth and candor to break down barriers. Speak candidly about your own experience so people can say, 'In a lot of ways he's no different than me. He's middle class, he went to law school, he has dreams for his career--how different is he really?' Tell people about your parents' jobs, about your childhood. Let them know you. Let them see that you're struggling to make a success of your career, too. Don't be on pins and needles. Let them know they can joke around with you. Of course you have every right to be aloof, but it helps to be warm if you can.

"When I started at my firm, I was the first African-American lawyer they'd ever hired. There are many, many law firms with a few attorneys of color, maybe yours included. When you're in that situation it's very easy to have your head turned inward. I remember going to a furniture store to buy a desk for my apartment when I first started out. When I got talking with the salesperson, he asked me what I did for a living. When I told him where I was working, he responded with genuine respect, 'You are with a great firm.'

firm in this city.' I was pretty full of myself. Then I got invited to a county [minority lawyers'](#) association meeting. There was the first African-American judge in the county. The room was full of guys who had graduated from law school in the 70s, when a job like mine would have been closed to them. They were very talented but they were shut out without careers but not a lot of prestige. Seeing people who strived the way they did was a humbling experience. I had no pretentiousness after that. The fact that I was the first one at my firm instead of one of them was a historical accident. I have been one of these older lawyers who broke the color barrier.

It doesn't pay to be arrogant no matter who you are. You don't have to pump yourself up. The fact is that if you will do great work or get elected to office, people will heap praise on you no matter who you are. You'll get your due.'