

ARTICLES

Becoming Essential

By Heather Pigman and Jessica Lu – May 19, 2020

Young lawyers often ask how to get the best assignments, identify the best skills to develop, and eventually position themselves for partnership in a firm or a leadership position in another organization. For many female lawyers, these discussions are often full of questions on how to accomplish those goals in a profession that, although making many strides toward diversity, has not yet reached that goal, particularly at the top positions.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, there is no “one size fits all” answer. But, one thing is certain: In today’s legal landscape, young lawyers need to develop both legal and business skills to maximize their chances for success. Here, we offer some suggestions designed to help accomplish both goals.

Become a Subject Matter Expert

Lawyers should be well-rounded legal professionals. But, at some point, many legal jobs will require a degree of specialty. Depth of knowledge in one area is sometimes more important than breadth of experience in many different areas of law. Depth of knowledge can mean different things, such as focusing on a specific practice area, mastering a new statute or emerging area of law, or becoming the essential e-discovery guru needed by so many law firms and corporations. The message here is to find something that is important to your team’s work and then occupy that space.

Having in-depth knowledge and being a resource for others puts you in the best position to take the lead on projects in that area. For example, when a partner needs a quick answer for a client about a legal issue in your practice, you want to be the person with the answer. Similarly, if you demonstrate knowledge of a jurisdiction’s rules and procedures, you are more likely to be asked to draft key case documents, such as a dispositive motion or a complex case management statement establishing the framework for a mass tort litigation. You will be in a better position to second-chair depositions (or perhaps take them, depending on the circumstances) if you know everything about the opposing party’s experts. These types of exciting opportunities often present themselves for young lawyers who build and then demonstrate their expertise. These lawyers also become valuable resources to colleagues, clients, and other stakeholders. That, in turn, establishes a favorable reputation and skill set that could offer significant advantages later in your career, whether you stay at one organization or transition to another.

Own Your Projects

Let’s face it: Not all assignments in your early career will be passion projects, and not all legal issues will be of equal interest to you. In fact, by handling certain types of tasks or cases, you may learn more about what you do not want to specialize in than what you do. But, to be positioned for long-term success, develop a reputation as a person who applies the same level of dedication and skill to both the tasks you love and the ones you could live without.

You have been asked to answer questions because those answers are important to someone. For many lawyers in senior or leadership positions, there is nothing more frustrating than working with a lawyer who gives minimal effort on the less glamorous projects. (Trust us, people can always tell.) Showing the same level of dedication and thoroughness to all projects equally is difficult, and the ability to do so is rarer than you might think. Build a name for yourself as someone known for consistently excellent work regardless of assignment rather than a person whose quality of work is so unreliable that supervisors never know what to expect. Supervisors typically have many demands on their time, and who gets which assignments often comes down to how much time and effort the supervisor will need to spend reviewing the work product. In other words, opportunities to get increasingly better work assignments flow from being known for reliable, high-quality work.

Seek Out Leadership Opportunities

Young lawyers can, and should, take on leadership roles at their organizations wherever possible. Do not assume just because you are one of the younger people on the team that no leadership roles are available to you. The skill of effectively leading and managing a team is best developed through experience. Seek out opportunities to develop that skill. Demonstrating these competencies is a prerequisite for many senior legal positions, including partnership, so waiting until you think you are “senior enough” to pursue opportunities may put you in a worse position than if you had sought opportunities earlier (even if you do not always get them).

For a more junior lawyer, developing leadership may mean volunteering for opportunities to coordinate or supervise paralegal assignments on projects that you are handling. It may mean taking the initiative to get newer team members (even if they are senior to you) “up to speed” on the issues in your case to ensure that a team runs smoothly. Being responsible, not only for delivering on a project but also for coordinating with an entire team to ensure it gets done properly, will make you integral to your organization.

The ability to manage projects efficiently and successfully is also important to your clients. Keep in mind that “clients” is a broad term that can include entities that hire your legal organization for a specific purpose or non-legal stakeholders in your organization (such as a board of directors or business managers). Opportunities to demonstrate to clients your leadership and other skills, as a young lawyer, can be tricky; there will likely be a chain of command between you and those clients. One possible approach to solving this issue is asking for opportunities to present your current projects to the client, either on update calls or through a targeted email. Similarly, volunteer to take and circulate notes on regular client calls. The key is to think about the options presented in your particular situation and, if none are apparent, to ask a more senior mentor how he or she gained valuable leadership experience and follow in that person’s footsteps.

Spot Issues *and* Solve Problems

In law school, you were likely given a fact pattern and then asked to write a memorandum identifying the relevant case law, applying that law to the fact pattern, and stating your conclusion. In practice, things tend to be a bit messier. Clients typically want to accomplish

specific objectives and hire lawyers to help them do so. In other words, your team already knows the conclusion and the question is how to get there. As a young lawyer, you are likely to be invited to meetings to discuss how to make that happen. Too often that scenario plays out in one of two ways: (1) The young lawyer sits through the meeting and says nothing, or (2) the young lawyer shoots down every idea offered in a debate club manner while offering no alternatives or constructive content.

Both are equally problematic when you are trying to increase the odds of long-term career success. The people who interviewed and hired you did so because they believed you added something to the existing team. Saying nothing undercuts confidence in you and makes you seem unnecessary to others who may not know you. In contrast, trying to debate every point makes you seem obstructive and demonstrates you can't focus on how to best accomplish the client's objectives in a legally appropriate way.

Young lawyers must be both problem spotters *and* problem solvers. If someone suggests a course that has a legal pitfall, absolutely raise that. But you also should offer a possible solution or different path. Even if that path is not the ultimate resolution, you will have shown that you are invested in the client's objectives and engaged in adding to the team's efforts to achieve them. You also may learn something from the responses of others or gain benefit from their experiences. Successful lawyers are not always right, but they are always engaged in accomplishing the best result possible for a client.

Adapt Your Communication Style

Not all clients or coworkers are alike when it comes to preferred communication styles, and figuring out those preferences will lead to more productive working relationships. Some senior lawyers like phone calls or in-person meetings, while others prefer a written analysis that demonstrates your thought process. It is your job as a young lawyer to determine the most effective way to communicate important updates and ideas. For instance, you may be working for a lawyer who only has time to skim each email you send. If you convey an important detail in the middle of a lengthy email, it will reflect poorly on you if it is overlooked.

The good news is that you—as a new lawyer—have resources available to help figure out how to make sure your points are heard. If there are others on the team, ask them about more senior team members' communication preferences. If you are the only other lawyer working on the project, the senior lawyer's assistant may have some valuable insight. Ultimately, after gathering what intel you can, you should go directly to the assigning lawyer, explain what you propose to do, and ask what work-product format would be most helpful. Show you have initiative by telling a senior lawyer you want to ensure he or she has necessary information and by asking about his or her communication preferences. And then, by providing the information in that format, prove you have the ability to pay attention to detail.

Volunteer Often

It will never hurt your career as a young lawyer to volunteer for projects, assuming you can manage your time wisely and meet required deadlines for both the work you already have and the work for which you are volunteering. It is important to take the initiative to work on new assignments, both to establish your reputation as a team player and to gain experience in all types of matters with a wide variety of senior lawyers. It is often through unexpected assignments that you may discover a new interest or talent, or learn a skill that was missing from your repertoire. Volunteering can also mean more opportunities to add value for clients by sharing your opinions and ideas.

In addition to answering a call for volunteers, if you see a need or gap to be filled, be creative in developing projects that will be helpful to your team and be forthcoming about suggesting them. Keep in mind that your ideas might be rejected by more experienced attorneys but volunteering those ideas can start a dialogue and show that you are interested in furthering client objectives while developing as an attorney. These conversations can, in turn, shape your thought process on new assignments going forward.

Conclusion

There is no single path to success for new lawyers, but there are many traits you can develop to give yourself the best chance of achieving your goals. Doing good work is the foundation, but you need to build a variety of other skills as well. That said, you may not be able—and do not necessarily need—to do everything at once. New skills and relationships are built one step at a time. You will likely be more successful by showing a steady increase in high-quality work product and skills than by showing a wide variety of mediocre work right now. Remember to take advantage of any mentorship opportunities whether they are formal within your organization or ones you seek to develop organically. You must be an active participant in your career development and not just sit on the sidelines waiting for others to notice.

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