



YOUR VOICE

11 Survival Tips for First-Year Associates

BY DUSTIN M. PAUL AND JENNIFER L. EATON

Concerns about starting your first job after law school are justified. It is terrifying. For many, the first year as an associate will be your first professional job. Little has prepared you for this confusing and stressful first year.

Even many summer associate positions fail to provide a realistic picture of what it is like to be an associate—or worse, they intentionally paint a false picture. After years of living through, talking about and guiding others through this process—including doing so formally as part of our firm's associate development committee—we

thought we would pass along some tips to the next generation of young associates.

1. Build trust and stay busy.

Building trust and staying busy have the same playbook: Do good work. That means not only creating a strong work product, but it also means anticipating the next step. If you are drafting a responsive pleading, think about the discovery you will soon serve to support the claims or defenses. If you are researching whether a particular contractual provision is permissible in a business contract, consider draft-

ing your own clause. You will stay busy if partners can trust you and your product.

2. Don't just identify problems; solve them.

In your first year, don't always expect your solutions to be the right ones. But a proposed solution demonstrates that you are striving for excellence and independence.

3. Don't get in your own way.

You can be your own worst enemy. Avoid self-imposed deadlines unless you can guarantee you will meet them. That said, if you can't meet your own deadlines, why would anyone trust you with major deadlines? Remember your mistakes. Most mistakes can be fixed, so be forthright when they happen and resolve them quickly. Know what you don't know. You are a first-year associate; you don't know it all. No one expects you to. Don't let your ego get in your way.

4. Responsibility is joint and several liability.

You work as part of a team. Never forget that. Your mistakes impact a partner, and a partner's mistakes impact you. But in the end, if something goes wrong, you will likely bear at least some responsibility. Take the initiative to send reminder emails and offer your assistance to colleagues. Saying, "I thought you were handling that"—even when a partner told you they would handle it—will rarely absolve you of responsibility.

5. Manage difficult situations.

You will almost assuredly deal with difficult clients, difficult attorneys and difficult situations. Usually, the best thing to do in a difficult situation—whether with a client, an attorney or a colleague—is document, document, document. Make sure your positions on difficult issues are known. You want to be on record if something goes sideways. If a partner decides to proceed in another direction, then there are certain protections available to you as an associate performing work under the supervision of a responsible partner under most jurisdictions' ethical rules.

6. Find a mentor.

Much of being a new associate is avoiding common mistakes and pitfalls, and who better to help you with those issues than someone who has already been through the associate experience? Look to current associates, new partners,

professors or attorneys you have met through social or professional involvements as a starting point. Ideally, you will have at least one mentor within your firm to ask firm-related

questions and one mentor outside your firm to ask for unbiased opinions, often about firm-related questions.

7. Build your professional network.

Professional involvements—such as Inns of Court and voluntary bar associations—are great places to start. Take charge and look for leadership opportunities and ways to shine within the organizations to which you belong. If you don't see long-term growth potential within an organization, consider dropping it for another involvement. You should also look for organizations and affiliations that are targeted to your goals, your practice area and your desired clients.

8. Set goals.

If your focus is only the day in, day out aspects of being a lawyer, you will easily get bogged down and likely never be happy. Make a plan for the short term and long term. Pursue professional opportunities, whether that is attending a conference or going to a young lawyers' social. More substantive goals should be measurable, actionable and attainable.

9. Find daily stress relief.

Find ways to manage stress. In the legal profession, time is a commodity, and you are worthy of some of your own time. Setting aside 30 minutes each day (at the same time, if you can manage it) is a good way to bring a small bit of order to your life. And find an extracurricular activity or community involvement that is completely unrelated to law.

10. Know your why.

The incentive structure of most law firms has the end goal of making the firm profitable. Before you step foot in your new office, you should know why you are there and what kind of impact you aspire to make during your tenure. It is easy to lose track of yourself in the day-to-day of the practice of law. Find your polestar. Keep asking yourself if you are headed in that direction. And don't be afraid to change course.



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11. This, too, shall pass.

Challenging cases, difficult clients and tight deadlines are temporary, at least on a case level. But everything is relative. You will always have a least-favorite case or assignment. Get used to the idea of not having a pristine portfolio of work, at least at first.

Before you know it, your first year will be over. You may feel more settled in your role and have a better idea of whether your firm is a good fit. Or perhaps you will feel just as lost as you did on day one. Now is a great time to reflect on your accomplishments, look again for your polestar and identify areas for improvement. Above all, be kind. A new class of first-year associates is arriving. Help them if you can.

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