

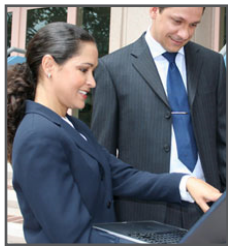


Feature

## Career Management for Attorneys

By Frederick Shelton

There are essentially three phases to a lawyer's career, one of which may or may not ever be realized. They are: (1) the Grinder, (2) the Minder, and (3) the Finder and Binder. The Grinder is the first- through third-year attorney who grinds out legal product—of a sufficient quality and in a billable quantity—to keep the partner and firm happy. Some time around the fourth year (give or take a year), management of other attorneys and a bit of client contact usually come into play. The attorney who is more than seven years out of school and has no clients is the Senior Minder, the most precarious position one can have in the profession. Why? If firm profits ever take a dive, these are the first people fired (in most cases, eventually replaced by less expensive associates). Finally, if knowledge, talent, training, and support from the firm are present, an attorney may become a Finder and Binder, also known as a Rainmaker.



It's a shame that these career phases are never taught in law school. But then again, given that client development, business plan writing and implementation, negotiations, and corporate psychology are all but ignored at virtually every law school in America (except for a brief time, when I lectured at the University of San Diego School of Law), it's not surprising. So let's get down to nuts and bolts.

If you are a junior associate at a firm, virtually everything that makes you successful today will not be good enough to insure your survival tomorrow. You're learning how to fill out the ubiquitous time sheet. You're learning how to bill and, hopefully, efficiently capture your hours. You're learning how to hone your craft. That's all good stuff, but it's not the stuff that will propel you to the heights of Rainmaker status later. Yes, it's important to become a good lawyer. But frankly, give me the choice between someone who is an adequate lawyer with a \$5-million book of business or a Harvard grad who is a master technician of the law and has no book of business, and I'll take the former everyday. It's an easy choice, actually. With the Rainmaker, I can hire a team of attorneys to clean up and polish his/her work. With the master technician, there isn't going to be any work brought in to polish.

The point is to begin thinking of yourself as a self-contained business and examine the future of that business. The first thing you need to do is evaluate the supply/demand value of the work you are doing. Ask yourself how hot your practice area is. There is no competition between, say, personal injury and commercial litigation. Insurance defense is notorious for low billable caps. Talk to your friends. Network with other attorneys. Talk with headhunters (the better ones will offer advice without pressuring you to leave your job). The direction you're headed in now will affect your life for years to come. If you're not in the right place, begin looking to move now.

You may not get the break you're expecting for years. But you won't find it if you don't look.

The next thing you need to do is begin developing valuable business-building skills and relationships. According to an article in *Forbes*, more than 90% of executives surveyed considered public-speaking skills essential to their success. Guess what? They are important to yours, as well. If you're not a member yet, join a local [Toastmasters International](#). I have made an extra \$50,000 in personal annual income as the result of one speech (which I gave for free). This is a safe, comfortable environment of business professionals who meet once a week for about an hour, in order to learn and improve their public-speaking skills. Hmmm, would this also offer an opportunity to network? You bet.

Another great marketing skill is writing. Is there a chance that someone reading this might contact me about his/her career? What do you think? Learn to write as an attorney but in a way that will be easy to understand for the layperson. Also, make sure to "give away the farm." Too many writers offer nothing but hints of what could be learned—if only the reader would call and pay them for their services. It's okay to let readers know you welcome business, but make sure you give them what they need instead of a "tease article." There are vast resources for learning how to write and get published at your library or online.

I'll leave you with a few thoughts about basic career management (which will be expounded upon in future articles). First, coming out of law school, there is a belief that it's better to go to a smaller firm because you'll get more advanced work. This is usually specious, at best. Yes, you might get into the courtroom more quickly. But it will probably be on small-exposure cases with little at stake. In the meantime, your peers at large firms might only start taking depositions after a couple of years, but they are involved in litigation (or transactions) where hundreds of millions of



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dollars are on the line. The difference in size, scope, and complexity of work will be vast and will offer a much greater breadth of opportunities to you in the future. It is almost always easier to go from a major firm to a smaller (usually lower-paying) firm than vice versa.

Finally, no matter where you start working, you probably won't end your career there. Change is inevitable. A good

rule of thumb is to prioritize the value of the practice area in which you will be practicing first, the firm with the best-known name next, and the money last. If you can get all three, congratulations, you're off to a great start!

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