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Must You be a “Type-A” Personality to Succeed in a Law Firm?

By Carey Bertolet

Today’s law firms are increasingly interested in promoting diversity among their ranks. While some law firms have invested in broadening the ethnic, gender, and sexual-orientation characteristics of their attorneys and staff members, one wonders how diverse a law firm can be. Assuming certain firms are diverse in terms of the demographics of their attorneys, are the most progressive firms still only employing Type-A personalities? More to the point, must a lawyer be a Type A to succeed in a law firm?



Especially among the elite firms in the world’s most significant legal marketplaces, there is little question that Type As predominate. Getting into a large, prestigious law firm generally requires that the lawyer have a record of

achievement. He or she must have outperformed classmates in both undergraduate classes and in law school. For most, performance at this level requires a degree of competitiveness, a substantial work ethic, and an inner drive to achieve.

In my law school, we called the worst offenders “gunners.” They were the law students whose principal goal was to climb to the top of the class. The gunners knew their competition, knew exactly how well they needed to score on exams to stay at the top, and were willing to forgo any amount of sleep to get there.

Anyone who has spent any amount of time working in a large firm knows that the competitive overachiever is in ample supply in the large-firm environment. When I was a junior associate, there was a more senior associate in my group who sent a firm-wide email every time he was in the office after midnight.

While one could argue that he was just doing his job, the more cynical among us felt that each email about the firm softball team time-stamped 1:00 a.m. was simply a way to keep the partnership informed that he was working harder and later than the rest of us. However, although several of us giggled about this senior associate’s transparent self-promotion, I still wondered, “Is this what it takes to succeed in the environment?”

I always assumed that Type-A personalities were people who were smart, hardworking, and ambitious. While others might play hooky on the first day of spring, Type As wouldn’t even think of leaving the office.

What does it mean to be a Type-A personality? Wikipedia describes Type-A personalities as people who “are often highly achieving workaholics who multitask, drive themselves with deadlines, and are unhappy about the smallest of delays.”

The origin of the Type-A moniker derives from research conducted in the middle of the 20th century by Dr. Meyer Friedman. With a colleague, Dr. Ray Rosenman, Friedman posited that there was a link between the behavior of the impatient overachiever and heart disease. I found it interesting that although “Type-A” and “Type-B” are generally used as descriptive terms, the origin of the term “Type-A” is actually clinical and was essentially used to diagnose unhealthy behavior.

This makes the question of whether you must be a Type A to succeed in a law firm seem even more insidious. Are law firms perpetuating an unhealthy personality type? In my opinion, understanding the history of the term “Type-A” actually informs the answer to the question.

While “Type-A” is a term people toss at many high-achievers, the truth is that it is possible to take certain elements of the Type-A personality and leave behind the more destructive. Certainly, attention to timeliness and urgency are necessary for a lawyer in a big firm. Indeed, lawyers broker in time. Lawyers generally charge for their time, and courts and clients routinely impose deadlines that cannot be ignored. However, lawyers can succeed without becoming obsessive about time.

Again, competitiveness is important to a law-firm career. A lawyer must always compete with lawyers at other firms and focus on generating the very best work product. Is it possible to remain competitive without becoming aggressive? I believe that it is.

Wikipedia tells us that the “Type-B personality is patient, relaxed, and easygoing.” Are these qualities consistent with success in a law firm? I would suggest that a patient, relaxed,



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and easygoing lawyer is not destined for failure in a law firm as long as he or she understands that at times, law firm culture demands intensity and a sense of urgency. The laid-back Type B who cannot evoke some Type-A behavior at times is likely not going to be a long-term player in law-firm culture.

At the end of the day, law firms exist to serve clients. While a client may enjoy having an easygoing lawyer on many days, on the days the client needs a zealous advocate or a push to meet a deadline, “relaxed” is not a word that will evoke his or her confidence.

Lawyers choose their practice areas and should be aware of which areas suit their personality types. A white-collar litigator may benefit from a more aggressive and confrontational style, whereas one might find fewer Type-A folks in a firm’s trusts and estates department.

A good lawyer, whether innately Type-A or Type-B, must be able to understand those qualities that appeal to clients and the leadership in his or her law firm. One needn’t be a red-faced horn-honker to demonstrate an appropriate sense of urgency when talking to a stressed-out client. Even the most likeable and laid-back lawyer must have a sense of time and attention to deadlines.

A healthy sense of competition is also appropriate in a law-firm setting, but that does not mean that only the cutthroat will survive. Although it’s unlikely that law firms will ever be truly diverse mixes of Type-A and Type-B personalities, individual lawyers in law firms can certainly find that balance in themselves.

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