



Darren Cottriel: Tips for Succeeding as an Associate

[by Teresa Talerico]

At 35, Darren Cottriel is a newly minted partner in the Orange County office of Pillsbury Winthrop, an international firm known for client services and diversity. Super Lawyers magazine recently named him one of Southern California's "rising stars."

How did he do it? Well, he got excellent grades in law school and spent his summers working at a firm and writing for the law review. And when he arrived at Pillsbury Winthrop in 1998, he made sure to cultivate a partner as a personal mentor.

A 1996 graduate of the McGeorge School of Law at the University of the Pacific, Mr. Cottriel was ranked third in his class. He specializes in litigation and represents a wide range of clients--from large land developers to financial institutions.

Q: How should law students and graduates prepare for jobs as associates at top firms?

A: The number-one thing for me was to do well in law school. Grades get you an awfully long way. The law school I graduated from was not a first-tier law school. It was important to be placed fairly high in the class to get an interview with a bigger firm. At my school, what mattered was class ranking. For example, a lot of bigger firms want to interview law students who are in the top 25% of their class. Where that cuts off at each law school will depend on what sort of grading curve the law school uses.

Q: Grades and class ranking are obviously very important. What about internships?

A: Do something. It's important when you're in law school to be productive. One year I did a writing research position on our law school law review. The second summer I worked at a law firm. When we interview people at our firm, we're always looking for what experi-

ence they have. If they're right out of law school, the only thing you have to go on is what they did before they went to law school or what they've done during law school. Obviously if you want to go into private practice at a firm, the best thing you could do is work at a firm. A lot of times that will parlay into a job offer. It's important to do something law-related to develop your resume and to develop your skills.

Q: What advice do you have for aspiring associates?

A: I had a really good mentor, and that would be the first thing I would tell people. When you get in a firm, whether it's through a formal structure or just on your own, try to latch on to someone who can act as a mentor for you, whether that person be a senior associate or partner: someone who's familiar with the firm and can help guide you through the process as you develop your career there. Some firms have a formal mentor program. My experience has been I just tended to, on my own, find someone who I looked up to and respected. You've got to be proactive about it because senior associates or partners are busy. You've got to be proactive in getting advice from them and picking their brain. That's invaluable to do that.

Q: Any stumbling blocks junior associates should be aware of?

A: One stumbling block is that a lot of associates assume, rightfully or wrongfully, that the firm is going to make sure they get all the training they need. One key to success is

to be very proactive with your career and with developing your skills and waiting for opportunities to present themselves to you. A lot of associates aren't as proactive as they should be because they're waiting for it to come to them. Those opportunities may not come to you or there may be those opportunities out there but no one knows you want them. It's important to have a game plan as far as what skills you want to develop.

Q: What's an example of how you did that?

A: Basically just making your requests known, letting the senior associates or partners know you'd like to work on a case that would give you an opportunity to do some depositions, for example. Or you'd like a case that would give you an opportunity to argue a key motion. Let them know so as they're going through their caseload, they've got it in the back of their mind that you're looking for an opportunity. The No. 1 thing is making your requests known. Second, when you get the opportunity, make sure you do a good job.