Top 7 Tips for Succeeding as a First Year Associate: How to Succeed as a New Associate in a Law Firm

Summary: Here are 7 insider tips for succeeding as a new first year associate in a law firm.

You've landed that associate position at a high-profile law firm. Now what? Do you plan to slave away in obscurity for the next several years, hoping that a partnership may be waiting for you at the end of the road? Or will you take steps to enhance your reputation, the better to position yourself for that next career move? We hope it's the latter. Here are some insider tips to help you do just that.

1. First Year Associates Need a Plan
Decide where it is you want to go and figure out the steps it takes to get there. If you don't yet have the skills for that dream job, acquire them. Is your goal to work in a corporation? Target your market. If working for Time Warner gets you juiced, put yourself in the path of media law assignments. Do you have an eye on a slot in the U.S. Attorney's office? Start getting some litigation experience under your belt.

See the following for more information:

- Women, Men, Planning and Unemployment
- Goal Setting

2. New Attorneys Need Mentors

Find a partner who's doing the kind of work that intrigues you, and get into his or her face politely, of course. Let her know of your interest and your qualifications, and you may find yourself on the short list of associates she calls upon. As the partner's reputation grows, so will yours. Not-so- insignificant bonus: When you're called upon to help, you'll end up with work that's rewarding. Otherwise, you'll go where the wind's blowing, says Carl White, a one-time associate in a white-shoe Manhattan firm. You could end up on a drawn-out case that doesn't interest you, and that's a death sentence.

It may be someone assigned by the firm or it may be a relationship that develops naturally. Whatever the case, a lawyer who's senior to you can induct you into the firm's culture and work with you to develop winning skills. The lawyer you're busting your hump for is not a good candidate: You want a mentor to be a guide, not a boss. At O'Melveny & Myers, for instance, partners never serve as mentors to the associates who directly report to them. "The idea is overall career development," says a partner in the firm's Washington, D.C., office.

That name-in-the-papers partner isn't always easy to approach or corral. But he's bound to have key people flanking him. That's your target. Catch the eye of a lieutenant. Get a sense of what he does on a day-to-day basis, and develop an informal mentor relationship with him.

See the following for more information:
3. New Attorneys Need to Have a Good Attitude

Sure, the client may be a pain in the neck, but it's not going to help you, your colleagues, or your career to state the obvious. Keep your snarky comments to yourself. "Saying something the partner already knows doesn't make you shine," says a partner with Allen & Overy in New York. "Being constructive and helpful is critical. We're in a service industry." You may not want to think that you're like a flight attendant, but guess what? You are.

See the following for more information:

- You Need to Be Nice
- Look at Your Job from Your Employer’s Point of View
- The Most Important Advice You Will Ever Receive
4. New Attorneys Need to Take Advantage of Training

It's easy to blow off the periodic in-house training sessions offered by many firms. You're inundated as it is, so spending precious hours on topics with no bearing on your current projects may seem like a waste of time. Don't believe it. There's a reason the firm offers the sessions to help you develop your professional skills. What's more, they're often run by senior partners, so it doesn't hurt to get in their sights.

See the following for more information:

- You Are Never too Good to Stop Learning
- Never Stop Improving
5. New Associates Need to Serve Many Masters

Even if you've got a particular partner in your sights, remember that a lot of different people will be looking at and gauging your work. All of them could have an effect on your career progress. “Every partner is a boss,” says White. You can't afford to piss off any of them.

See the following for more information:

- You Always Need a Backup Plan
6. New Attorneys Need to Constantly Look Their Best

That jailhouse pallor and those bags under the eyes aren't helping your image, even if they're the result of long nights spent breaking your back and other things for the firm. Build some time into your schedule for the gym. You'll look better, sleep better, and most important of all, work better. Lawyers are athletes: They've got demanding jobs; they work long hours; they're under high stress. Lawyers need to condition themselves in order to survive the daily grind.

See the following for more information:

- Work, Details, Your Surroundings and Your Mind
- Play Each Day Like It is Your Most Important
7. New Associates Need to Lose That Ego

Lawyering is more about the team than the guy who throws the touchdown. Sure, the client may not know you exist. It doesn’t matter. Your work is under scrutiny always. The world may not applaud, but your firm will know your worth. “If your work is good,” says White, “the senior associates and partners will know it and the good partners will want to work with you.”

See the following for more information:

- Get Security by Concentrating on the Needs of Your Employer
- Concentrate on Your Contribution

See also some in-depth advice from BCG Attorney Search!

- 10 Biggest Career Mistakes Big Firm Attorneys Make: 10 Ways to Survive in a Big Firm
- Top 10 Characteristics of Superstar Associates Who Make Partner