Top 10 Tips to Succeed in a Law Firm

Summary: Like most jobs, success at a law firm is all about forming relationships, working hard, and navigating the company culture.

- Law firm life isn’t easy.
- The hours are long and the competition is exceedingly difficult.
- No wonder a strong percentage of new law school graduates simply give up on the law to pursue other interests.
- Problem is, lawyers are needed, and usually for a much greater good than just themselves.
- Here are 10 tips to help new and veteran lawyers succeed in law firms.

So, you graduated from law school with good grades, killer recommendations, and knowledge of the law. You land an $180,000/a year associate gig, and you’ve passed the bar. You’ve done everything you could to get this coveted law firm position. Congrats! But now what do you do once you’re in the door? Like most jobs, success at a law firm is all about forming relationships, working hard, and navigating the company culture.

“Pretty much in any profession, what separates the very best from the rest is a combination of exceptional skills, tireless work ethic, grit/never quit attitude, great team members, and luck. It’s no different with the practice of law,” Oliver Armas, Managing Partner of Hogan Lovells New York office, told LawCrossing.

Armas and other legal experts shared their advice on how to succeed at a law firm, and the following are the top 10 tips:

1. Treat everyone with respect.
2. Hone your writing skills.
3. Immerse yourself in your work.
4. Lose your ego.
5. Develop business.
6. Take the time to understand what your client wants and needs.
7. Never give less than 100%.
8. Get involved.
9. Dress the part.
10. Maintain your sanity.
1. Treat everyone with respect.

While everyone sees the value in pleasing partners, it’s good advice to not ignore people at other levels as well. While the golden rule of “do unto others” is just a good mantra to adhere to, being respectful to everyone you meet can be beneficial to your career. For instance, paralegals, court professionals, other attorneys, and anyone else you may encounter may be able to do favors for you, or at a minimum, not impede you when you want something.

Additionally, you should not count out anyone, even those not in the legal community, because you never know who one day could be a client, said Harrison Barnes, the CEO of the legal recruiting company, BCG Attorney Search.

“Whatever you are doing and whomever you meet, you need to realize they represent potential business for you and/or your firm,” Barnes stated. “It does not matter if you are at an ultra-expensive and prestigious law firm or if you are at a smaller law firm, or even if you are just practicing on your own. Every time you meet someone, they are a potential client. How you act towards others will also determine whether they are likely to be your client in the future. Take no one for granted.”

2. Hone your writing skills.

Not all attorneys end up giving grand speeches in a court room, but all attorneys must be able to communicate well in writing. To do this, experts say to practice, practice, and to learn and emulate great communicators around you. Additionally, reading good writing in all forms, from newspapers to books, will help you hone your craft.

“Don’t ever believe that writers are born (not made),” legal writing expert Bryan Garner said to The Student Lawyer in 2002. "It isn’t true, any more than the idea that golfers or violinists or cooks are born. The fact is that even those with talent—Tiger Woods or Itzhak Perlman or Martha Stewart—has worked extraordinarily hard to develop their technique. It’s no different for writers.”

Excellent writing should not be saved just for your legal documents either. In the current era of short texts and snarky social media posts, clients and colleagues still expect professional and courteous emails and letters from their attorneys.

3. Immerse yourself in your work.

People notice when attorneys are phoning it in; and unless you are a partner with a huge book of business, doesn’t let yourself become mediocre or you’ll end up on the chopping block. Top attorneys are passionate about their practice, and this passion helps them become the best in their field because they immerse themselves in their work and continuously educate themselves about the topic. At a law firm, choose areas that will excite you, and your enthusiasm will get you noticed positively by your bosses, peers, and clients.

“I chose practice areas that I find intellectually stimulating and that I truly love to study and think about each day,” attorney Brad Frazer wrote on LawCrossing. “I read articles about copyright law for fun! It’s trite, but it’s true: do what you love and the money (success) will follow.”

If you are in a practice that you end up not liking, see if you can get work in other areas. Your supervisors will be impressed with your initiative, and you will also look flexible and open to new things. But most importantly, you’ll find something that interests you.

4. Lose your ego.

Legal experts all agree—once you enter a law firm, lose the ego! No one wants to hear that you’re too good to do mundane tasks, and no one will be impressed by your pedigree because they too are probably just as impressive. That’s why they’re there with you. Arrogance will not take you far, and if you rest on your previous laurels, you are most likely going to be left behind by someone much hungrier.

“Excellent lawyers check their ego, pedigree (and arrogance), etc. at the door,” Armas said to LawCrossing. “If you don’t accept the premise that there is always someone out there who is better, smarter, and more hungry than you -- you are literally a fool. And beware the lawyer with a chip on their shoulder! That lawyer from a ‘lesser school’ is gunning for you.”

Law firm environments, like most law schools, are full of competitive, smart people; and to truly stand out,
you must be able to assess your strengths and weaknesses. You won’t be able to do that if you can’t see past yourself.

“Excellent lawyers are selfless and embrace the following ethos: “Clients comes first, firm comes second, and I’m last,” Armas said.

5. Develop business.

As a first-year associate, your main job is to do whatever the partners want you to do, so you may not have that much time or energy to get business. However, as you move along in your career, you will be meeting clients and hopefully building your book. Associates who don’t focus on business development struggle to find new jobs if they seek to leave the firm in the future, and it’s even harder to move if lawyers are at the partner level. In essence, a lack of business can create barriers for you.

“If you do not work hard to generate great amounts of business, you will be at the mercy of your firm for your entire career. They can pay you what they want to, and they can let you go if they want to. And when a firm lets a partner go with no business, the partner often has few options because most firms only want to hire partners with books of business. Going in-house is not always easy either,” Barnes said. “You might as well know that the most important thing you can do as an attorney for your career is to develop a lot of business. Your life and happiness in your career will largely depend on this.”

6. Take the time to understand your clients’ wants and needs.

Clients want an attorney who not only can win their case, but they also want someone who communicates well with them and anticipates their needs.

“First and foremost, successful lawyers are the ones who understand the importance of ensuring that clients are treated with the highest levels of professionalism and courtesy. A client may not be able to discern a well-drafted contract from a sloppily compiled one, but they can certainly identify arrogance, bad manners, a lack of responsiveness, unclear or confusing advice, missed deadlines, and bills which are higher than expected,” Kevin Wheeler wrote on Lexis Nexis.

For attorneys at law firms who want to develop relationships and get new business, they should respond promptly to client communications, explain things clearly, and listen to what their clients want and need. If you are given an assignment, take the time to learn exactly what is expected of you to avoid any type of discourse later. This focus on customer service will cement you in people’s minds as someone dependable and likable, someone they will want to work with and recommend.

7. Never give less than 100%.

Even though associates are at the bottom of the law firm lawyer pyramid, they are still expected to turn in work that a partner pretty much only has to sign off on. That means that “okay” is not good enough. You want mistake-free, well-researched, well-written documents, each and every time you turn them in to your superior. Essentially, you want to always produce work that is ready to show a client, even if that “client” is a law firm partner.

“Just because its initial audience is another person at the firm doesn’t mean the same standards [of excellence] don’t apply,” Gregg LoCascio, a partner in the D.C. office of Kirkland & Ellis told LawCrossing.

8. Get involved.

As mentioned above, no one in a law firm survives by doing the bare minimum. To last in the cutthroat environment, attorneys need to be as involved as possible, meaning they need to show up where they’re expected but also go the extra mile. That could mean volunteering at events, networking outside of work, and forging a mentorship relationship with someone prominent in the office.

“From the day you walk in, treat the place as if you’re an owner,” Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe partner Neel Chatterjee told LawCrossing. “Getting involved will cement your commitment to the firm and the firm’s commitment to you. That feeling of reciprocal commitment is critical to your long-term success.”

Getting involved is also important to increasing your visibility, according to Ashwini Jayaratnam. The attorney said that being known is a positive and will increase your job security.

“Let people at the firm know who you are,” Jayaratnam wrote for the New York City Bar Association.
“Avoid the desire to hunker down and lay low. When going to firm events, set yourself a goal of talking to at least three partners in your practice group. This lets them know that you are interested in their group and eager to take on assignments. Also, in today’s environment where law firms are cutting associates, having your name out there and your presence known makes it less likely that partners will consider letting you go.”

9. Dress the part.

Substance is important, but so is image. For decades, attorneys in law firms have adhered to a strict conservative dress code, so that’s what clients expect. Attorneys who show up with unkempt hair, trendy clothing, or other non-traditional looks tend to throw off law firm clients.

“Sorry, but the Rules prevail and those Rules are conservative,” Findlaw stated. “Suits (preferably blue or gray) and ties for the men. Tailored suits with a minimum of jewelry for the women. No long hair for the men. No dangling earrings for the women. In case of doubt, dress and act like the senior partners do. It may seem like a trivial or obvious matter, but it counts more than you might expect.”

10. Maintain your sanity.

A study from the American Bar Association and the Hazeldon Betty Ford Foundation found that one in three attorneys are alcoholics. Additionally, 28% suffer from depression and 19% show symptoms of anxiety. Patrick R. Krill, who spearheaded the study, said that these startling statistics are a sign that lawyers do not take care of themselves.

“The law has always been a magnet for hard-working, self-reliant, and competitive people who often prioritize success and accomplishment far above personal health or wellbeing,” Krill said. “On top of that, stress, unhappiness and imbalance abound, while unhealthy coping skills such as excessive drinking are the cultural norm — malignant, learned behaviors passed down through the profession with the frequency of a dominant gene.”

While working too much is the norm in law firms, it is important to take care of yourself, mentally and physically. That could include anything from grabbing dinner with a friend to exercising after your workday. After all, if you are unhappy and unhealthy, no amount of law firm success will be worth it in the end.

What advice do you have for associates to succeed in law firms? Let us know in the comments below.

See the following articles for more information:

- 5 Tips for Becoming a Better Lawyer
- Should You Become an In-House Attorney?
- What Is the Best Time of Year to Make a Lateral Move to Another Law Firm? These 4 Months