



THE NEW ELLIS GROUP

Monday Monday

Connecting the Dots with Karen Kaplowitz



*Helping you create and reinforce the habits of successful career building,
gleaned from my work as a business development strategist, trainer and coach*

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Beware of Nonbillable Time Commitments

At year end reviews, some lawyers heard that they needed to beef up their billable hours in 2019. Few were told that they needed to increase their nonbillable hours in the coming year. If you intend to advance in the ranks in your current firm -- or position yourself to be an attractive lateral candidate -- it is important to avoid nonessential, nonbillable time commitments. There are endless possible nonbillable demands on your time: pro bono work, firm committees, bar committees, alumni activities, mentoring and many more. As you evaluate which nonbillable commitments are essential and which are nonessential, here are some questions to ask before you accept new commitments:

- How does the activity fit into your short-term and long-term career objectives?
- Who extended the invitation? Was it a key player in your career to whom you cannot say no?
- Will the activity provide you with access to significant people in your firm, in the legal community or business community?
- Does the activity involve clients or potential clients?
- How does your firm treat the type of nonbillable activity under consideration? Is some nonbillable time, like pro bono work, given more weight than other activities?
- Will you learn any valuable skills such as leadership of a group or project management?
- Can you limit the time commitment involved?
- Is there a tactful way for you to decline or defer a request?

There are many demands on lawyers to be good team players and good firm citizens. No one can accede to all the demands for nonbillable work. It is important to keep a clear perspective on your career objectives and other responsibilities and to evaluate nonbillable activities in that framework.

Example: For several years, a senior associate was very active on firm committees. She was on the diversity committee, the summer program committee, and was a leader of the firm's pro bono committee. One of her partner mentors encouraged these firm activities as a way of solidifying her relationships in the firm and getting more visibility as she approached partnership. When she was elected to the partnership, she thought it would be unseemly to reduce her internal firm commitments. But as a new partner, she found herself under a lot of [pressure to become a rainmaker](#). She asked her partner mentor to help her evaluate her internal commitments. He recommended that she recruit another lawyer to help her lead the pro bono committee so she could reduce her time commitment. He advised her to stay on the diversity committee because it had a lot of client-facing activities which would help her become a rainmaker. Lastly, he suggested that she resign from the summer program committee which demanded a lot of time when she also had family summer vacation plans.

Are you making conscious choices about which nonbillable activities will advance your career? If you have accepted more nonbillable responsibility than you can handle, is it time to adjust the load?