

EXTRA

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Supplement to The Los Angeles Daily Journal
and San Francisco Daily Journal

Wonder Years

Advice helps newly minted attorneys achieve the goal of using their law-school educations and new jobs to begin shaping vibrant careers.

By Karen Kaplowitz

To the 3,848 new lawyers who just earned their California bar numbers, welcome to the profession. You are embarking on a great adventure: how to take your law-school education and your new job and start shaping a vibrant career. Here are some tips to help you achieve that goal.

Underpromise and overperform. Your career depends on doing a great job consistently. Some parts of your work can be evaluated objectively: Did you win the motion/trial? How much did the jury award? Was the transaction completed? However, a lot of your work will be evaluated subjectively: Was the settlement a good result? Did the transaction go smoothly? You not only have to do a great job but also have to help your clients and colleagues understand that you did a great job.

To make sure your work gets proper credit, communicate the risk and the probabilities to your clients. Managing expectations is very important. To show your dedication, you can promise to work hard, but you must not promise to get a result that is unattainable. As one lawyer put it, underpromise and overperform.

Build your network from Day One.

Having a vibrant career requires that you build a robust network. Right now is the best time to start the process and establish good networking habits. Your firm may not expect you to generate business for the firm as a young lawyer, and in fact, your firm might discourage you from bringing in business that is not "suitable."

But creating habits that will help you generate business over the life of your career is important.

The core habits include the following:

- Never leave home without business cards. Take them everywhere. Understand that everyone you meet is a prospective client or referral source. For example, the attendant who parked my car when I was a brand new lawyer ended up owning a gas station in Century City, making him an excellent client for some lawyers. Be interested in the people you meet, and always find out what they do. When you ask people what they do, two things happen. You get the information you need, and you also get the chance to tell people what you do. If you ask, people almost always ask you back.
- Grow antennae to listen for problems that might rise to a need for your services or those of your firm. When your client casually mentions that her company is experiencing difficulties with an Asian supplier, be ready to offer your help—from your firm's lawyers in Asia, other firms you work with who have Asian lawyers, investigators, or otherwise.
- Be memorable. Learn how to tell people what you do in a short and memorable way. Don't get in the habit of just telling people you are a lawyer. That does not explain enough to anyone. For example, when I defended entertainment companies in sex-harassment and other employment cases, I

used to tell people that I specialized in sex, drugs and rock and roll. And I have heard real estate lawyers call themselves "dirt lawyers."

- Answer phone calls and return messages the day you get them, if at all possible. Nothing makes clients, prospects, colleagues and opponents more upset than not getting responses.

Announcements. You probably have been asked for a list of people to whom to send announcements. If you turned over a short list, primarily consisting of your family and a few friends, you are doing yourself a disservice. In creating your list, start with everyone you know who thinks highly of you. Your fans are the people most likely to recommend you to others and to do so enthusiastically. Take the time to include your former classmates from high school, college and law school, family and friends, parents of close friends, and former teachers and employers. Include everyone you know who is or may be in a position to do business with you or refer business to you.

Announcements are an opportunity for you to let people know where you are and what you are doing. They also let people know that you want them to stay in touch with you. Try to include a personal note with your announcements, too. You can just add a note to the announcement itself to keep the process simple. If your firm does not do formal announcements, send out your own note, with your new affiliation and contact information.

Keep in mind that, once you give your firm your list for announcements, often that list ends up in the firm's general mailing list, and your people will start getting all the firm's announcements. You may want to separately identify people who should not go on the general list. Does your grandmother care about firm announcements that don't mention you? I have gotten many announcements over the years with no reference to the person in the firm who first got me on the list and no clue of why I should pay attention.

Do not exclude people just because they are not in a position to do business with you at this juncture. Many relationships you build at the start of your career will not mature for years.

How to develop relationships. You will be meeting many new people as a new lawyer. As you do, get their cards, and always put them immediately into your database, including pertinent information like where you met them or their interests or family members. If people are interesting to you when you meet them, you need to be able to stay in touch.

Take the time to get to know people, too. It is a lot harder for your opponents to be rude or difficult if you have a relationship. It is also a lot easier to build relationships if they have depth. You should pay attention to the personal as well as the business or professional objectives of the people you are dealing with.

If they mention that they are traveling to France and you have been there, share some good tips. If you learn that a client's child is considering a law career, offer to be a sounding board. You want to know about the lives of the people you think are important to you. That includes their families, their careers, their hobbies and other interests.

Staying in touch with people. The reason you are building your Rolodex is to stay in touch with people. Here are some simple ways to do that.

- Holiday cards. Holiday cards are a no-brainer. When firms make holiday cards available, do not send them out with just the firm's name on them. At a minimum, sign your name. Better still, add a personal note to each one. You have a list—your announcement list is your starting point—and you will add to it every year. If your firm does not make cards available, send them yourself. You have no excuse not to use the occasion to stay in touch with people.

- Firm newsletters. Newsletters can be valuable, at least for staying in touch with businesspeople and other lawyers. However, as with firm announcements, if the only contact between you and people in your Rolodex is an impersonal newsletter, with no identification it is from you, over time, people may not remember the connection to you. Newsletters and announcements without any identification that they are from you are of value in building your profile only if you remind people in some other

way that you are with the firm.

- **Legal Updates.** Anytime you learn of a new legal or business development that you think will be of interest to clients, or prospective clients, send out a note or give a call about it. If you have a group of people, you can do one and then personalize it for various individuals. You are letting people know that you are paying attention to what may interest them.
- **Activities of mutual interest.** If you want to stay in touch with classmates from college or law school, get involved in alumni activities. Instead of just attending an alumni dinner, call a few people who interest you and ask whether they want to join you. The same holds true for bar meetings. If you meet someone at a meeting who interests you, call and see whether they are attending the next one. That simple act will make your next encounter a richer one. If they are not going, you can make plans to get together. Given the time pressure you are under as a new lawyer, you must leverage every nonbillable hour.
- **Enlist the help of your staff.** Let your assistant know that you want to build your network. That means asking your assistant to automatically add names of people you are dealing with to your Rolodex and to the firm's announcement lists or other lists. It means asking your assistant to bring to your attention items about the people you know. I have been blessed with the same assistant for 20 years, and her attentiveness is a huge boon to me. From her standpoint, this "people" part of her job makes it more interesting, too.

Work/life balance. Time management is one of the core competencies you need to succeed. If you have not mastered time management, find a course immediately, and learn how to do it. You need a system for keeping track of what you have to do and for prioritizing your tasks. You'll always be juggling a lot.

- **Getting your ducks in a row.** Get in the habit of having all your ducks in a row for each project you do. For very complex projects, write down every stage, even the most mundane, so you can organize the effort and keep track of what you have done.
- **Give up student habits like cliffhanging.** I remained a cliffhanger—finishing projects at the last minute—for several years until I met my partner, Blanche Bersch, who had three small children. She explained that she did filings and other preparations in advance so that, if one of her children got sick, she would not be



in crisis. She always had time to polish her work, too. Getting your part done early makes it much easier on the other people you work with, too, including other lawyers, clients and staff.

Finding and nurturing mentors. As a new lawyer, you have a lot to learn. You need to find many people to be your mentors and teachers. Mentors take many forms. Consider some of the following:

- **Your secretary.** If you are lucky to have an experienced legal secretary, chances are that your secretary knows a lot more about practicing law than you do at this juncture. Appreciate and take advantage of the help you can get from your assistant.

Your assistant may help you in myriad ways: the culture of your firm; the politics of the firm; the demands of particular clients or other lawyers; court requirements; forms; other know-how; work habits. I was honored as a young lawyer to receive an award from my secretary's legal secretary's association as "Queen Boss of the Year." I was doubly honored because they had only had "King Bosses" before me. Your secretary can be a powerful mentor to you.

- Other lawyers. Many other lawyers you work with may be valuable mentors. You may be more comfortable seeking out a mentor who is a few years ahead of you rather than a very senior lawyer in your firm.

You also may find lawyers in other firms, classmates or other colleagues from whom to seek help. With lawyers outside your own firm, you have to be more careful, of course, about client confidentiality. Try not to be afraid that you will look stupid if you ask questions. You will make many mistakes as a new lawyer, especially with respect to matters that require judgment. Having mentors to run things by can save you and your clients a lot of grief. You are striking a balance between becoming independent and avoiding risk.

Whoever your mentors are, nurture them. Be respectful of their time and very appreciative. Be sure to consider how you can be of value to them, too.

Civility is a must. Being a fierce adversary in a civil manner is possible. For the long-term development of a great career, you need the respect of everyone with whom you work.

Civility is not the same as rolling over; it is about learning appropriate boundaries. The best referrals are from your former adversaries, both lawyers and clients, who saw you in action, know your value and had a reasonable enough relationship with you that they can pick up the phone on another matter.

I had the good fortune to learn the value of civility early from the dean when I was in law school. When some of the women at the University of Chicago Law School encountered blatant sex discrimination from law-firm

recruiters, I was one of the leaders of a group of women who demanded that the law school bar discriminatory law firms. When the law school would not do so, we brought a Title VII charge and ultimately a lawsuit under Title VII. The federal District Court held that the law school was an employment agency under Title VII, a landmark ruling, although the court did not require the law school to investigate law-firm discrimination. Throughout the lawsuit, the dean was always civil to me and the other women law students involved. It was a key lesson.

Pro bono work. Even though you have a lot on your plate as a new lawyer, try to make time for some pro bono work. Not only will it enrich your spirit, and perhaps remind you why you became a lawyer, but it is also an opportunity to grow as a lawyer.

I learned so much as a new lawyer from organizing a group of lawyers to investigate and then sue the Los Angeles women's county jail. I learned the hard way, for example, about the unpredictability of litigation when, at a hearing on a temporary restraining order, the county counsel brought up an escape attempt made by one of the named plaintiffs, a member of the Manson Family, and suggested that perhaps I had slipped her a hacksaw blade.

That issue derailed the hearing, and we never got back on track that day. My pro bono work accelerated my growth as a lawyer. If you can find the time, you likely will get a lot of value from your community service.

Good luck as you embark on your new, exciting career. Nothing beats practicing law for sheer intellectual satisfaction and enormous opportunities to affect the lives of people, businesses and communities. Enjoy creating your own vibrant career.

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