

Harnessing idealism

Avoiding burnout and doing good at the same time

Several months ago in an article in the *New York Times* Sunday Review titled “Why You Hate Work,” Tony Schwartz and Christine Porath argued that many Americans now feel disengaged from and dissatisfied with their jobs.

They posited that a cultural transformation has overcome most workplaces, where investments in employees and their development have been replaced by a bottom-line mentality with productivity prized above all else.

The article troubled me, as I worried that aspects of such dissociation might exist in today’s legal profession.

I also worried about how the article’s main message applied to today’s law graduates entering private practice.

Yesterday’s paradigm saw generations of students enter law schools with the hope of landing at a prestigious firm and dropping anchor for a career marked by a sound living, engaging client work and active community involvement.

Law schools reinforced this perspective, which led to graduates entering firms with healthy doses of idealistic aspiration — viewing law as a profession that welcomed and rewarded long-term investments in firm culture, client relationships and civic engagement.

In time, new lawyers became part of that firm’s social fabric and invested in their client relationships and larger communities, putting their legal skills to use outside of the office nearly as frequently as within.

Many of today’s law school graduates arrive at firms with much of this same idealism.

Too often, though, that idealism wanes over time, with some young attorneys feeling disengaged as a result of long hours and pressure to meet demanding deadlines.

What, then, to make of today’s law practice for new associates? Many of the challenges seem here to stay and are short of easy solutions.

One part of the answer for new associates is to commit at the outset of their careers to an active and regular diet of pro bono work and other community service.

The opportunities right here in Chicago are many: Volunteer regularly at a local legal clinic; offer to help a partner represent an indigent criminal defendant at trial; accept a court appointment to argue a criminal or habeas corpus appeal; help



Closing Argument

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a new charitable organization incorporate and acquire tax exempt status; or join a charitable organization’s board and ask to serve on its legal committee.

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This work has an energizing and engaging impact on new associates.

Through it they learn in immediate and direct ways how to communicate with clients, judges, juries, government agencies and colleagues — how to develop and relay legal advice with confidence and clarity, manage expectations and think on their feet — in short, how to practice law.

All along the work also allows young lawyers to provide immeasurable help to individuals and organizations in need — a calling of our profession that yields personal and professional enrichment well beyond a number on a pay stub. The experience proves that through giving comes receiving.

The importance of these pro bono experiences early in one’s career cannot be overstated.

Young associates who take on significant pro bono work early in their careers typically become more engaged and invested in all of their work and in their community.

Giving back enables associates to become a meaningful part of the local community and fulfill the important obligation lawyers are privileged to have of providing legal guidance to those in need.

Fostering an environment in which pro bono work and community involvement is encouraged is key to helping engage young lawyers in their firm and their work.

Through pro bono work, young lawyers also learn how to practice law with a sense of balance and, often with added confidence, find themselves better equipped to serve as a valuable and engaged member of a litigation or deal team.

Realizing these benefits and developing these skills also makes them more likely to see a path forward within the law firm and to make the firm their home for the long run. ■

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