

Career Advice for First-Year Law Associates

Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom partner Allen Lanstra explains three keys to becoming a great attorney for new associates. Lanstra, who leads training and development for litigators, encourages them to excel at lawyering, build and nurture relationships inside and outside the firm, and be mentally and physically present and engaged in their work.

For new attorneys joining the practice of law this fall, the long journey of a professional career begins. And like most adventures, how you start significantly influences later stages. So how can early-career attorneys get the beginning of their careers right?

First, recognize that most truly impressive pre-career achievements happened in the classroom and were guided by syllabi, checklists, and other roadmaps. The legal profession supplies none of that.

This uncertainty can unnerve those who have excelled for years at executing academic recipes that demanded sacrifice, but were calculable—do 1, 2, and 3, and get X. But the lack of a prescription liberates those who embrace it. A fulfilling and rewarding career can be achieved in many different ways that are unique to the person.

As first-year associates, now is the time to establish the foundation for this journey. It does not require a crystal ball, but it does require reflection.

Yes, ambitions like partnership or the bench can motivate us. But regardless where the journey leads, achieving goals and long-term fulfillment in our profession is satisfied by something more fundamental: being a great attorney.

Simply put, legal careers are governed by the quality of our lawyering—and it's not something we can fake.

Excel at Lawyering

Therefore, in my book, the first pledge that a new attorney should make at the outset is to become a great attorney.

But how is that first pledge pursued? Learn, learn, and never stop learning. Being a great lawyer is not a title or station, but an active process. Enter with an apprenticeship mindset and never abandon it.

At every stage of a legal career, there will be attorneys around us who we can learn from. Some will be down the hall, others across the table. But pay attention to them.

And don't accept firm-assigned mentors as the only mentors. Rather, assign your own mentors. Then don't wait for them, as if it's their job or something your firm owes you (although it does). Instead, take the reins and engage your mentors with purpose.

Ask them questions—why an approach was employed, why an alternative strategy wasn't, and what to do in different situations. Offer your thoughts on a subject. Never sit silent, afraid of displaying lack of knowledge when you, in fact, lack that knowledge.

Equally important, teach yourself. Take seminars and read books about excellent writing. If you've never participated in a deposition, or have not done so recently, review practice guides. If you've never worked on an initial public offering, read a treatise about it.

Perhaps most important, create experience if you aren't getting it. While I had many writing opportunities as an associate through firm clients, I developed my argument skills through teaching law and pro bono appeals.

Build Relationships

The second pledge a new lawyer should make is to build and nurture relationships. The richness of practicing law is in the relationships we get to develop and experience.

We grow close with colleagues and clients because we find ourselves shoulder-to-shoulder with them in foxholes. Treat them like teammates—be genuine, supportive, and interested.

The intrinsic value and opportunities that come from meaningful professional relationships define careers. Don't miss out on them by being self-consumed and self-concerned.

For those who aren't extroverts, have no fear: building professional relationships is just like building friendships. You simply show genuine interest in others.

And connect with attorneys at other firms or clients that are at your seniority level, not three rings above you on the ladder. Finally, be mindful that our professional reputation must be protected by our actions.

Treat everyone with respect, act with courtesy and civility, and be ethical. Lawyers collectively do not easily pardon dishonorable conduct that stains our fundamental role in society—protecting the rule of law. We're also built to remember bad actors.

Be Present

The first two pledges are fed and made reachable by the third pledge: being present, in both the cognitive and physical sense.

When seeking a work-life balance, appreciate what a rewarding legal practice entails—collaboration, teamwork, and lawyering. Passive or robotic participation is not lawyering, so be an active listener and contributor in all meetings and conference calls.

Research, memoranda, and diligence may seem like "work orders." But lawyers don't make widgets. Engage in the work and give full attention to it, and reject the narratives of multi-tasking or unimportant assignments.

Viewing legal tasks as widget-making disregards the nuance, creativity, attention to detail, and foresight that are part and parcel of great lawyering.

My best litigation teams are the ones with the best junior attorneys. Associates who doggedly investigate the facts, learn the case deep enough to spot issues, and search for the best authority to support a position are invaluable.

Indeed, they are the attorneys who earn the opportunity to attend key depositions or attend trial—and not as a reward, but because they are necessary to success.

Finally, being present also means being in attendance. Physical togetherness enriches our experiences. Indeed, that’s why Thanksgiving and 30th birthday parties aren’t remote.

Yes, the world and industry have changed significantly in recent years. But great lawyers build relationships that they enlist to tackle challenging problems, and they team up to consider approaches and solutions.

Effective collaboration occurs more often and produces more learning and relationship-building when we are cognitively and physically present.

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