

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 158, No. 204

Law school graduates can find success

Fall is the time when recent law school graduates begin their careers as attorneys. Although I began practicing law about 18 years ago, I clearly remember my first experiences in court, taking and defending depositions and counseling clients. Even in the first year of their career, new attorneys should be taking specific steps to ensure their success this year and into the future.

Be responsive. First and foremost, a new attorney needs to be responsive to the requests of those making assignments. As a partner at my law firm, when I call or e-mail an associate, I generally expect to hear back from them within the next few hours. While sometimes it is impossible to respond right away, an e-mail or quick call to the partner setting up a time to talk is a good practice. Otherwise, a partner will assume that the associate is unavailable or unwilling to help with a project. As a result, an associate who fails to respond to calls or e-mails will eventually find themselves without work.

Be responsible. When a partner sets a deadline for that project, an associate should be ready to meet that deadline. If the associate cannot meet the deadline, they should inform the partner as soon as possible and explain when the project can be completed. Additionally, if an associate has questions regarding an assignment, those questions should be posed as soon as possible so that the project can be fully completed in a timely manner. Nothing is more annoying to a partner than an associate who informs them at the last minute that the project is uncompleted.

Be proactive. When completing a project for a case or a deal, an



Margo Wolf O'Donnell is a shareholder in the litigation and employment practice groups at Vedder, Price P.C. She successfully represents clients at all stages of litigation and regularly acts as a business advisor on the prevention of litigation. She is a past recipient of Law Bulletin's "40 Lawyers Under 40" publication and Leading Lawyer Network recognized her as one of the "100 Leading Women Lawyers in Illinois."

associate should think about how their discrete task fits into the larger picture. As a litigator, I like it when an associate takes the time to understand the case and the client. Suggestions for next steps or additional assignments leads to more responsibility and higher level assignments.

Also asking for feedback immediately after the completion of a project leads to improved perfor-

“ Associates should also keep in contact with law school classmates and contacts who have the potential to refer business in the future.”

mance. Waiting months until a review to find out a partner's impressions is sometimes too late to correct any missteps or wrong impressions. At the same time, if an associate would like to be more involved in a case and have a higher level of responsibility, the associate should let the partner know as soon as possible.

Be prepared. Attorneys should always be looking for educational opportunities to improve their skills and learn more about an area of the law that interests them or that pertains to cases on which they are working. Associates should seek out seminars or presentations that pertain to their work or that of their firm. Then, when a case comes into the firm that involves a subject area that interests an associate, an associate can let the partner on the case know that they have a specific knowledge or ability in that area.

Be present. New associates should make an effort to attend firm meetings and events in order to get to know partners and other associates at the firm. Associates should also keep in contact with law school classmates and contacts who have the potential to refer business in the future. Taking the time to be present and get involved in community activities that do not necessarily involve other attorneys will pay off in the long run with new sources for referrals.

Be ready to pay your dues. Last, but not least, the first few years of practicing law can be grueling. But the process of learning to be an attorney should also be rewarding and fun. Be ready for the work and the challenge, but also the satisfaction that comes with learning how to be an effective and successful attorney.