

## **INTRAOFFICE PROFESSIONALISM: HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL ASSOCIATE**

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First impressions at a law firm can be very sticky. Unfortunately, many bright, perfectly capable associates get off to a rocky start simply because they do not appreciate the professional environment within most law firms and the expectations of those they are working for. With that in mind, I've put together the following tips to help you transition from being an excellent law student to a "go-to" associate (or a "must-hire" summer associate) – starting on day one. First are ten general principles to guide your interactions with those you work for, followed by nuts and bolts advice for receiving and turning in work, and then some final thoughts regarding the longer view.

### **Ten Core Principles**

**Golden Rule: Make Your Colleagues' Lives Easier.** People want to work with those who make their lives easier. Whenever unsure about how or whether to do something, ask yourself, "What will make my colleague's life easier?" If you can consistently add value for the person you are working for, in ways big and small, you will get more work. The day will come when people are working for you, but that time is not during the first year or two of your legal career. Your initial focus should be on serving those you are working for. Everything that follows below flows from this fundamental principle.

**Rule #2: You Are Not as Busy as the Person you are Working For.** The classic myth among junior associates is that life will get easier when you are a partner. It won't (not for many years, at least). Few appreciate at first the various demands that partners have to juggle, both inside and outside of work. They may be staying up throughout the night with infants or sick children, getting children ready in the morning, picking their children up after work, attending (or missing) school functions, taking care of an elderly parent, etc. In other words, they will constantly have other responsibilities pulling at them, demanding their time. When you work late, it likely will affect only you. For most partners, working late affects their kids and spouse as well – and may cause significant tension in their home. Indeed, if a partner leaves at 5:00, her day is not done. She likely left so she could see her kids, and then will work late after her kids are in bed. In addition, partners have pressure to bring in new clients, to manage numerous existing clients, and (in many firms) to serve on community boards, Bar Association committees, etc. On top of that, they *still* will be billing the same number of – if not more – hours than you. Never complain to that person about how busy you are. You will not get their sympathy, but you very well may annoy them. And even if you are in fact busier, keep this in mind: they have paid their dues, and now they expect you to. Fair or not, that's a fact.

**Rule #3: Your First Client is Your Firm.** As a new associate, you will rely primarily on your colleagues for your first projects. Many junior associates complain about doing non-billable work, or that they are just “behind the scenes.” This is the wrong attitude. As a first year associate, the person who assigns you work *is your client*. If you prove yourself to her, soon enough you will be working directly with the “real” clients. Even if asked to work on a non-billable matter, or to prepare materials for a CLE your colleague will be presenting, treat it with the same attention and care you would for a paying client. Again, refer to rule #1.

**Rule #4: Never Turn Down a Project.** Just as you would never tell a good client that you are too busy to help them, never do so to a partner (see Rules 1, 2, & 3). If you *truly* are so busy that you cannot meet the deadline (and not because of an evening cooking class), discuss with the partner whether there is any room to reshuffle the priority list for the various projects on your plate. But, keep in mind that *someone* has to do the project. If a partner is up at 2:00 AM writing a brief because you were “too busy,” this will not make her life easier. And, you soon may find yourself not busy at all. *Never, never* turn down a project because you don’t “want” to do it. Again, somebody has to do the work – and if you don’t want to, you can be sure the partner doesn’t.

**Rule #5: Never Miss a Deadline.** Few things will aggravate a busy partner more than a late assignment. Your project is likely a building block for someone’s next project. Never simply miss a deadline. If a project is taking longer than expected, you find yourself being pulled in too many directions, or something intervenes beyond your control, tell the attorney immediately and well in advance of the deadline. The partner may extend the deadline, find another associate who can help, or reduce the scope of the project. But don’t leave the problem with them; tell them what you can do instead, then deliver. And make sure this does not become a pattern for you.

**Rule #6: Understand Your Role.** In most instances, your role as a junior associate is to provide support to your partners. You may do this by researching the law for them, writing first drafts of briefs, preparing documents for depositions they will conduct, assisting with document review or due diligence, and in dozens of other ways. Through these experiences, you gain experience and exhibit your ability and potential to the partners. Always understand, though, that the partner is ultimately responsible for the client relationship. Do the absolute best job you can, but if a partner rejects your suggestions, heavily edits your work, or accepts credit from a client for work you have done, do not take it personally. Do not sulk. There may have been other considerations at play that you were unaware of (or, perhaps, your suggestions were a bit off-base). In any event, learn from the experience and find a way to continue to contribute.

**Rule #7: Accept Responsibility.** Eventually, you will make a mistake. Everybody does. When this happens, partners will be much more interested in how you respond than in why it happened. Frankly, they likely will care less why it happened; they are more interested in whether you are mature, honest, and self-confident enough to take

responsibility. In fact, many firms look specifically for this trait during the interview process. If you take responsibility for your mistakes – including mistakes of those who you supervise – almost any mistake will be forgiven. If you assign blame elsewhere, you will lose others’ respect and confidence. Two caveats: (1) take responsibility and apologize, but do not grovel – it does not come across as professional; and (2) you will be expected to *learn* from your mistakes; don’t make the same mistake twice.

**Rule #8: Be Responsive.** For better or worse, you are now connected almost 24 hours a day through email and smartphones. If you will be out of your office for an extended period of time (30 minutes or more), be sure your assistant knows where you will be and how to reach you. Return all voice and email messages promptly. Some firms have a policy that all messages must be returned within an hour. If your firm does not, adopt that as your own policy. Even if you respond simply to inform the partner that you are headed to a meeting and will get back to her later, she will appreciate the response. It will ease her anxiety. It will make her life easier.

**Rule #9: Keep Client and Firm Confidences.** Do not discuss firm business with people outside of the firm. Do not discuss client business with anyone who doesn’t need to know (even within a firm). Be sensitive to your surroundings, particularly in bathrooms, elevators, at lunch, on a plane, etc. It is your duty to protect your clients’ and your firm’s confidences. This is the one area where the failure to do so just once could cost you your job. This is not discretionary.

**Rule #10: Treat Everyone With Respect.** The original Golden Rule. Though the above advice refers only to your relationship with partners, the advice applies to anyone with whom you work. Keep in mind that even associates one year your senior may be asked to evaluate you, and they will be partners when you are eligible for partnership consideration. And treat *all* assistants with respect, not just those who may work for you. You can learn a lot about how the firm works from staff, and their support (or lack thereof) can make or break you. Moreover, many assistants have worked for years, if not decades, with certain partners. If you disrespect an assistant, his or her partner – and all the other assistants – will likely hear about it. And, most importantly of course, it’s just the right thing to do.

### **Getting Work: Nuts-and-Bolts**

#### **Receiving Projects.**

1. **Take notes and ask questions.** Always bring a pad and paper to every meeting. Listen carefully and take extensive notes. If you are unclear about anything, ask questions until you are sure. Be persistent. It is okay if you don’t understand something at first. It is not okay, however, to go back the next day with questions because you neglected to clarify or write something down. This will not make your partner’s life easier.

2. **Understand the exact issue.** Before you leave the meeting, restate precisely the issue you are being asked to research. Do this even if you feel it is clear to you. Often, upon hearing again what they have asked you to do, partners will realize they were not completely clear and revise their initial instructions. If you do not ask, however, they will not recall later that they were unclear. Rather, they will think you were not listening carefully.
3. **Understand the scope.** Be sure you understand the scope of your project. Is the partner looking for a full-blown memo for the file, a simple answer in an email, or (often) both? Can you use Lexis or Westlaw? Should you research the law only in one state, or should you look at outside jurisdictions as well? Is there a specific form or template the partner would like you to start from (depending on the project)? These questions make you look thoughtful and detail oriented – and may prevent a partner from having to write off your time.
4. **Get a deadline.** Do not leave until you have a clear deadline. If the partner doesn't give you one, ask for one. If he says "sometime next week," clarify if that means by next Friday. In his mind, "sometime next week" may mean midweek. Again, if you do not ask for specificity, the partner may remember the conversation differently days later. You will not annoy a partner by seeking a clear deadline. Instead, he will appreciate that you are being detailed and responsible.

### **During Projects**

1. **Take Ownership of a Project.** For your first few assignments, you likely will be asked to help with a small piece of a larger project. It may be reviewing a contract, summarizing deposition transcripts, or writing one section of a larger brief. While doing that piece as well as you can, demonstrate an interest in the larger project. Ask how that piece fits into the bigger picture. Ask what the next steps will be. Take the initiative to review other parts of the file (for instance, the legal and correspondence spindles) to get a sense of the client's backstory and history with the firm. (Note: Consider this an investment in yourself – do not bill for work you are not asked to do!)
2. **Provide Updates.** Keep your partners updated as to the status of the projects you are doing for them. In this regard, no news is not good news. Long stretches with no communication may lead the partner to assume you haven't made progress (and may create anxiety for them). That said, respect their time and update them appropriately. While a weekly update may be reassuring, daily updates may become annoying. Find out what each partner prefers (daily, weekly, emails, voicemails, etc.). Notably, the purpose of this is to reassure the partner, not to get affirmation that you are doing a good job. Do not ask the partner to review what you've done so far – this will make you look like you need your hand held.

3. **Be Proactive.** If, however, for any reason the project is not going according to plan, address it immediately with the partner. For instance, if the project is taking longer than anticipated, or if you've reached a fork in the road strategy or research-wise (that you cannot resolve yourself), seek guidance well before the deadline.
4. **Prepare for Meetings.** If you need to (or are asked to) meet with a partner during a project, prepare for that meeting – no matter how informal it may seem. Show the partner that you respect her time. Write down your questions in advance. This won't make you appear dull, but conscientious. Be prepared to explain where you have looked and why you have not been able to find the answer already. Bring copies of statutes or cases for both of you if you may be discussing them. Whenever possible, bring proposed solutions, not just problems.
5. **Adopt your Working Style to that of the Attorneys You Work With.** Your job is to work well with your partners; it is not their job to work well with you. Each partner may have his or her own preferences about how they prefer to communicate (what medium and frequency), how they like to receive work, etc. Find out what those preferences are from other associates, and take notes about each partner's preferences after you have worked with them.

### **Handing In Projects**

1. **Hand the Project *to* the Partner.** Whenever possible, hand your work product to the partner in person and ask if she would like to discuss your conclusions (and be prepared to do so!). Do not simply email the partner your work, leave it in her inbox, or ask your assistant to give it to the partner. Handing your work to the partner shows respect, maturity, and confidence, and it provides you an opportunity for further interaction. Then, follow up with an email so the partner has it in electronic format, as well. Now she can access it from anywhere, if she desires to. If the partner is out of the office, wait until she returns. If you cannot, email it to her *and* leave a hard copy on her chair with a brief note offering to discuss the document at her convenience. If you are out of the office, email it to her and ask your assistant to print out a copy and provide it to her.
2. **Provide Complete Materials.** If your memorandum or brief relies on cases or statutes, provide copies of those with your memorandum, along with the Keycite summary for each case (preferably clean copies, with key aspects highlighted, clipped to the back of the memorandum or brief). If the partner would like to review a source you have cited, this will make his life easier. Even if he does not, it will demonstrate that you are detail oriented and respect his time. Few others will do this. But you will – and you will stand out because of it.
3. **Never Turn in a Draft.** You may be asked to prepare a draft, or told that “a draft is fine.” This just means “be prepared to be edited.” It does not mean expectations are

lower. Everything you submit to a partner should be well organized, accurate, properly formatted, typo-free, and should include proper citations. Draft pleadings should include the caption. Draft letters should include a heading, date, direct dial, etc. Take pride in your work product. Assume it will go out as is.

### **Follow Up**

1. **Always ask “What’s next?”** When you turn the project in, always ask if there is anything else you can do. Even if you never want to touch the project again, ask the question. It will reflect that you view yourself as part of the team. Finally, a week or so later, follow up one last time to confirm that nothing else has come up relating to the project that the partner would like your help with.
2. **Seek feedback.** You should seek feedback for every major project you do. If you don’t receive any feedback after a reasonable time, don’t just wait passively; take the initiative to seek it out. This expresses a humbleness and desire to improve. Respect that the partner is busy, though, and may not have the time to provide feedback. Ask once, but don’t pester. Seek out constructive criticism, too, not just compliments. And when you do get feedback, handle it gracefully. Remember that perception is reality; if a partner thinks you did it wrong, don’t debate the partner. Rather, focus on what you can do next time to prevent that perception.

### **Final Thoughts**

**Be Enthusiastic!** Always show enthusiasm for even the mundane and menial tasks, as well as the big, exciting project. People are drawn to those who have enthusiasm. Exhibit pride in your place at the firm by diving into projects and striving to do even seemingly trivial tasks to the best of your ability. Establish a reputation for being a team player who is not afraid to roll up your sleeves and do whatever needs to get done. This is how you get the opportunity to work on great projects.

**Roll up Your Sleeves.** There are no shortcuts to becoming an effective, respected lawyer. Ultimately, the only way to improve significantly and become comfortable is through experience. If you want to get better at taking depositions, you have to take more depositions. If you want to become more effective at negotiating contracts, you have to negotiate contracts. *Seek out these experiences; do not avoid them.* And don’t let any bumps in the road deter you. You will not be perfect at first, and neither were the partners you work for. Strive to be, and prepare, prepare, prepare – but don’t beat yourself up over mistakes. Learn from them and look forward to your next opportunity. Likewise, the only way to learn the law is to read the law. A secondary source may help you understand it, but *you* must roll up your sleeves, re-read cases, re-read statutes, re-read regulations, get out a pencil and take notes as you do so. If it still isn’t clear, re-read it all again. There is no substitute for this. Don’t expect anybody else to do this work for you, and don’t expect anybody else to swoop in and fix a problem for you. You

are a professional now. Act like one. Dress like one. Treat others like one. Be self-sufficient, responsible, and reliable.

**Build Relationships.** Understand that the relationships you have with those you work with will determine your job satisfaction more than the work itself. Law, ultimately, is about people – those you serve and those you work with. Ask questions of those around you, about their work, their career, their experiences, their families, and their own goals. Show interest in them, not just in what they can do for you, and they will do the same.

**Take the Long View.** Finally, you may find that your first job is not what you had hoped for. Indeed, few people today retire from the same employer they start their career with. Don't let this affect your effort, though. Approach your work as though it is your dream job. Build strong relationships, acquire as much experience as possible, seek out more responsibility, and set yourself up for the future. You never know when your break may come – which client may offer you an in-house position, which partner may leave and take you with, or which employer may have an opening. The single most effective thing you can do to set yourself up for future opportunities is to do outstanding work today. Indeed, that is the only thing you can control – focus on that, find value in doing your work well, and your break will come.