

SUCCEEDING AS A FIRST YEAR ASSOCIATE IN A LARGE LAW FIRM

Career Development Office



1. **Have a positive attitude.** You are at the start of an exciting new career. Hopefully, you'll be learning a great deal and working with some talented attorneys. Enjoy the experience as much as possible. Even if you are grinding away on a project you find tedious, try to maintain an upbeat demeanor. By focusing on the positive, you'll make a good impression on your colleagues, and you may even find that you enjoy your work more.
2. **Meet all deadlines.** It is important to establish yourself as an attorney who can be relied on to meet deadlines. When you are given an assignment, be sure to ask by what date the project needs to be completed. Budget enough time to meet that deadline. If something unexpected occurs and you think you might miss the due date, call the assigning attorney as soon as possible and explain the situation. Never let a deadline pass and hope no one notices.
3. **Sweat the details.** Make sure that all your work, whether it is an e-mail to another associate or a memorandum to a client, is accurate and precise. In addition to being accurate, all of your written work should look professional and be easy to read. Remember that every written assignment you produce will be scrutinized. You want to build your reputation as an attorney people can rely on for high quality work.
4. **Proofread, proofread, proofread!** Always remember to proofread your assignments before you turn them in. Do not rely on your legal assistant for this, as it's your responsibility. Typos undermine your credibility as a reliable and knowledgeable associate. Plus, you never know when a memo may go straight to a client!
5. **Get to know the support staff.** Make an effort to meet the support staff and be kind and courteous to everyone. Be friendly to all the legal assistants that sit around you. Visit the supply room on your own. Introduce yourself to the night staff in the mail room, the copy center and the word processing room. At some point, you'll be the one trying to catch the last Fed-Ex of the night!
6. **Return calls promptly.** Always return all business calls you receive the same day. Treat partners and junior associates with whom you are working as clients and return their calls as soon as you can.
7. **Understand your assignments before leaving the supervising attorney's office.** Make sure you have a complete understanding of the legal issues. Also, clarify your role. Does the supervising attorney want you to write a memo or to report back to her orally? Ask about the use of computer research tools – you really do not want to be the first year who billed a client \$35,000 for using Lexis (and there always is one!). Ask if other associates are on the same project, as they may prove to be a good resource to you. Ask for samples of the type of work you are doing – or find them yourself by searching the firm's document database. While many firms have internal libraries of sample documents, it may still be helpful to find a few samples prepared by the particular attorney with whom you are working. Always ask for a deadline and the approximate number of billable hours to spend on an assignment.
8. **Don't be afraid to ask questions.** As a project progresses, you may have additional questions to ask the assigning attorney. Do not hesitate to go back to that attorney and ask your questions. You do not want to spend hours "spinning your wheels" or "going down the wrong track."

9. **Keep the attorneys you are working with updated on your progress.** Let your supervising attorney know how your assignment is progressing. Discuss what issues have arisen and how much time you are spending on the project. Some attorneys like receiving updates in person. Others prefer e-mails or voice-mails. Try to determine your supervising attorney's preferred method of communication as soon as possible.
10. **Take a proactive approach to getting work assignments.** If there is a type of project you would like to try, make sure you tell the head of your department or the person in charge of associate assignments. If there is a certain attorney you would like to work with, let that attorney know. You need to take charge of your career and get the experience you want.
11. **Prioritize your work and know your limits.** If you are working on several projects at once, make sure you complete the ones with the most urgent deadlines first. There are times when you'll be overwhelmed with work and a partner will still show up at your door with another assignment. Be prepared to ask if the new assignment is time sensitive and let the partner know when you could realistically begin working on it. You do not want to be taking on so much work that the quality suffers; however, saying "no" to work in a large firm should definitely be used judiciously.
12. **It is okay to say "I'll get back to you" if you don't know the answer.** You don't want to give inaccurate information to either another attorney or a client. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't guess. Tell the attorney or client that you'll get back to her and take the time to research the answer and get it right.
13. **Ask for feedback.** Attorneys are almost always busy, and many are too busy to stop by your office to review the memo you've written. Take charge and ask for feedback. Constructive criticism will help you become a better attorney.
14. **Find a mentor and a buddy.** Sometimes you may be assigned a mentor and/or a buddy (usually a younger associate to ask your "silly" questions to). These attorneys can be valuable resources for you. In other cases, you may develop your own mentor/mentee relationships with attorneys with whom you connect. Whether it is part of a formal program or in an informal context, make sure that you develop a good relationship with at least one senior attorney whom you respect and with whom you are comfortable speaking. Throughout your career, you will need advice about your career path, as well as about sensitive work issues that arise.
15. **Be aware of your billable hours.** A law firm is a business and billable hours lead to its revenue. If you are not hitting your "target hours," speak to your department head and/or mentor and ask if work can be directed to you. Also, talk to attorneys you enjoy working with to see if they have any available projects.
16. **Stay organized.** You will be reviewing and drafting a great number of documents. You will also be receiving numerous e-mails and voice-mails. Set up a filing system for your documents. You do not want to be heading into a meeting with a partner and realize you have misplaced an important letter from a client. Make it a habit to complete your time sheets daily.
17. **Establish "work practices" with your legal assistant.** It's important for you to establish a good working relationship with your legal assistant. Often legal assistants have a great deal of experience with firm procedures and can help you make a smooth transition into firm life. Consider inviting your legal assistant out to lunch and asking him about his work. How can he help you be more efficient? Will learning to dictate be beneficial? How does he want you to distinguish between urgent and non-urgent assignments? Does he like to work overtime?

18. **Your legal assistant should always know where you are.** If you are going to be out of the office, leave a number where you can be reached. Having lunch out of the office or attending a meeting at another firm? Let your assistant know.
19. **Create personal research files.** As you finish assignments, create some personal research and sample files. Keep copies of cases or articles that are likely to be relevant on other assignments and samples of documents that you will be asked to draft frequently. Examples include: research files on state merger statutes and employment agreements; sample litigation files for document requests and summary judgment memoranda.
20. **Take advantage of marketing opportunities.** Attend events where you have the opportunity to network. Keep in touch with your SALS classmates and other contacts you have. Most firms are very supportive of associates' marketing efforts.
21. **Take a vacation!** Many first year associates are too concerned with their billable hours to plan a vacation, but you'll need one... maybe even more than one! Try and use as many vacation days as you are permitted. Consider planning at least one full week vacation in March or April and take another week off in the summer when work tends to slow down. Remember to change your voice-mail and prepare an automatic reply e-mail before you leave.
22. **Involve yourself in firm activities.** Participating in firm activities and joining committees makes you visible and demonstrates your commitment to the firm. Firm activities also provide you with an opportunity to develop relationships with attorneys outside of the work environment.
23. **Keep track of your nonbillable time.** Although attending seminars, having lunch with potential clients and participating in firm events are not billable, keep track of this time. At review time, you may be asked to detail your contributions to the firm and having a record to review will be beneficial.
24. **Evaluate your acquired skills and career path annually.** Don't expect to know everything about your new position immediately. It always takes time to settle into new jobs. However, you might find it helpful to choose a date about a year away on which you'll seriously think about your current position and your desired career path. Although your firm may have annual reviews, it may still be beneficial for you to take some time on your own to evaluate the skills you've learned over the year and to identify those skills necessary to reach your career goals.
25. **Keep in touch with SALS!** Staying in contact with SALS after graduation will provide you with opportunities to enhance your career through speaking engagements, networking with fellow alumni and attending alumni association events. Also, remember that the Career Development Office at SALS will always be here to provide you with assistance!