



## LAWYER TO LAWYER MENTORING PROGRAM

### WORKSHEET J

### CAREER SATISFACTION

Worksheet J is intended to facilitate a discussion about balancing career and personal life, putting daily pressures into perspective, reconciling job expectations with actual experience, and maximizing career satisfaction.

#### WHAT WENT WELL?

Start by sharing with each other a brief story of something that went well in your practice this week:

---

---

Share your reflection by on one of these questions: What caused the good event? What does it mean? How did you contribute? Others? How can you have more such events in the future?

#### ACTIVITIES FOR TODAY

- Share with the new lawyer techniques to create and maintain balance between personal and professional life. Share your own experiences, including successes and failures, in finding balance between your personal life and career.
- Discuss strategies to achieve the following components to balancing personal and professional life:
  - How to create expectations for your employer and clients that are compatible with a healthy and balanced lifestyle.
  - How to give your all at work while saving energy and emotion for family.
  - How to plan for personal time.
  - How to maintain physical health with a busy schedule and how doing so contributes to your productivity and success.
  - How to make nutritious choices at home, at work or on the road and how doing so maximizes performance and energy levels.
  - How to plan ahead for the challenges of caring for children or aging parents.
  - How to develop and maintain friendships or other relationships when time seems to be in critically short supply.
  - How to foster professional relationships.



- How to be efficient and productive at work, as well as how to prioritize and delegate tasks.
- How to set limits at work in order to prevent burn-out.
- Share stress management techniques. Discuss the attached article. Pat McHenry Sullivan, *You Can Find Time to De-Stress*, LAW PRACTICE TODAY, Feb. 2006.
- Discuss how to reconcile job expectations with the actual experience at work. Discuss the new lawyer's expectations for his or her job, identify the aspects of his or her job which do not meet those expectations, determine together whether the expectations are realistic, and discuss ways to make changes which will positively affect the work experience.
- Discuss ways to maintain a positive attitude at work and create a positive work environment to maximize enjoyment of work.
- Discuss the importance of identifying an individual in the work setting who can help answer questions about the culture of the office and how to balance your career and personal life. If mentoring in-house, help the new lawyer identify that person (if it is not the mentor).
- Discuss ways to positively deal with the criticism of employers and clients.
- Discuss how pro bono work may contribute to having balance in a new lawyer's life.
- Share with the new lawyer tips for succeeding in the practice of law. Discuss the suggestions made in the attached articles. David J. Levy, *Surviving Your "Junioring" Years*, LAW PRACTICE TODAY, March 2005. Dennis Kennedy, *Twenty Lessons for Lawyers Starting Their Careers*, LAW PRACTICE TODAY, March 2005.
- Discuss the "do's" and "don'ts" of leaving a job because of job dissatisfaction, including the following tips:
  - a. Do work hard until you leave. If you are in the process of looking for another job, it will be easier to find one while you still have one.
  - b. Don't burn bridges by leaving on bad terms. You never know when and how you will have to interact with a member of your old firm in the future, or whether you will want to come back to your old firm.
  - c. Do be careful about the reasons you say you are leaving. To keep the relationships you have built intact, keep your reasons for leaving focused on the positive growth you expect by moving on rather than the negative experience you had which caused you to want to leave.
  - d. Don't forget to mend difficult relationships before you go. Find something nice to say and shake hands with those you had problems with at your old employer so that you will be remembered as pleasantly as possible.
  - e. Do stay in touch with your old employer. Maintain the good relationships you built because an old employer always has influence over your career and your reputation.



### **ACTION STEPS**

End the session by discussing what action steps you can take to either improve or set yourself up for future success based on today's discussion. Discuss how one or more of your Signature Strengths can help you achieve success in these steps.

---

---

### **RESOURCES**

*Life in the Balance: Achieving Equilibrium in Professional and Personal Life*, American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division 2002-2003 Members Service Project.

<http://www.abanet.org/yld/about/writtenguide03.pdf>

Sharon Meit Abrahams, *100 Plus Pointers for New Lawyers on Adjusting to Your Job*, A.B.A. Publishing (August, 2004)

Kathy Morris et. al., *Ask the Career Counselors...Answers for Lawyers on Their Lives and Life's Work*, A.B.A. Publishing (2003)

Kathy Morris et. al., *Direct Examination...A Workbook for Lawyer Career Satisfaction*, A.B.A. Publishing (2001)

M. Diane Vogt et. al., *Keeping Good Lawyers: Best Practices to Create Career Satisfaction*, A.B.A. Publishing (Nov. 2000)

George W. Kaufman, *Lawyer's Guide to Balancing Life and Work: Taking the Stress Out of Success, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, A.B.A. Publishing (June 2006)

## Visionary Times

---

### You Can Find Time to De-Stress

We spend the majority of our waking hours either preparing for work, working, or recovering from work.

Being at work often feels like being Steven Covey's proverbial woodsman with a dull saw. Once we take the time to sharpen the saw, we'll work more efficiently. But how can we get away from the ever-growing workpile long enough to sharpen our tools or our wits?

"Every time I take a break," said a nurse, "Work is more satisfying and I'm better able to serve my patients. But we're so short staffed that there's always something urgent that needs attention right now."

**Fortunately, it's possible to find wisdom for work without abandoning your responsibilities, even in the midst of whatever chaos confronts you right now:**

First and always, breathe deeply and with awareness.

Under stress, it's easy to repress your breath. When your breathing is shallow, your energy level, your mental alertness and your confidence all drop. Conversely, when you breathe deeply, you become more alive. As you breathe consciously, you naturally trade concerns about the past and future for awareness of the present.

The connection between breath and vitality is honored in most of the world's religions. The Hindu physical yoga tradition teaches many different breathing exercises to increase physical and spiritual alertness. The ancient Greek word "pneuma" and the Latin "spiritus" both can be translated as breath or spirit. Throughout the Hebrew Bible are verses reminding us that without breath or spirit, we are dead; with it, we come alive.

**Challenge the "dragons" that inhibit good work and life.**

It's as if the business and professional world is under the spell of two wisdom-and energy-draining dragons. The fire-breathing one's message is "Hurry up! There's always more to be done." The one with the paralyzing breath warns, "Be careful! Everything you do could be wrong."

There's only one way to handle the dragons. Face them, and admit the truth of what they say. There is always more we can do, and everything we do could be wrong. But when we accept this reality of human existence **and** commit to doing our best, we can tap our wisest, most efficient self.

[Tweet](#) 0 [Like](#) 0 [Share](#) 0 [+ MORE](#)

---

**Visionary Times**

*Proudly powered by WordPress.*

November 2005


**LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SECTION**  
 MARKETING • MANAGEMENT • TECHNOLOGY • FINANCE

# Law Practice TODAY

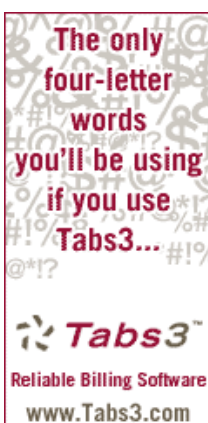
Search LPT

GO


Articles

[Current Issue](#)[Marketing Articles](#)[Management Articles](#)[Technology Articles](#)[Finance Articles](#)[Contribute](#)[Subscribe](#)[ABA Law Practice  
Management Section](#)[Advertise](#)

XML



The only  
four-letter  
words  
you'll be using  
if you use  
Tabs3...

 **Tabs3™**  
Reliable Billing Software  
www.Tabs3.com

Sponsors



Related Publications

MANAGEMENT

## Surviving Your “Junioring” Years

by David J. Levy

March 2005

 [Print This Article](#)

Being an associate is not easy, particularly in your first year or two of practice. Law School and the Bar Admission Course provide you with limited preparation, expectations are high and the demands are great. While the learning curve is steep, and some growing pains are inevitable, the following guidelines should make your experience more enjoyable and more successful.

### 1. Work Hard

This surely goes without saying, but hard work is the cornerstone of any associate's success. Do not think you are doing anything particularly novel if you work evenings and weekends. While the quality of your work is surely more important than the quantity (see number 3 below), the number of hours worked will never be overlooked by your employer.

### 2. Take Initiative

Sitting back, doing only what is asked of you and generally “flying under the radar” may help you manage your time, but it is not going to advance your career. You need to take some initiative to get the experience you'll need to be successful in future years. For example, in a litigation practice, you may research the law for a motion, prepare an Affidavit of Documents before a discovery, or draft a pre-trial or mediation memorandum. You will doubtless be familiar with the file, but this knowledge is somewhat wasted if you do not also attend on the motion, discovery, mediation or pre-trial. While your supervising lawyer should try to get you involved in these events, he or she will not always think of it, and it is up to you to ask. Sometimes it won't be possible due to scheduling conflicts, other commitments, etc., but take every opportunity to assist more experienced counsel at significant file events. You may be able to do something substantive, or your role may be strictly as a spectator. Either way, you will benefit from experiencing the “big picture,” and you will be better prepared to handle these events on your own when the time comes.

### 3. Stress Quality Over Quantity

As a junior lawyer, it will take you longer than a more experienced colleague to complete any given task. Accept that fact, recognize that it will mean that you will be putting in more hours than your more experienced colleagues (see number 1 above), and ensure that the work you do is of good quality regardless of how long it takes. If your supervising lawyer has a choice of you spending two hours on a task and performing it well, or spending one hour and having it full of errors and in need of major revision, which do you think he or she will prefer?

### 4. Be Realistic About What You Can Achieve

While initiative is good, it is also important to be realistic. You always want to



The Successful Lawyer:  
Powerful Strategies for  
Transforming Your Practice

Buy Now

appear eager to help, and never want to say “no” for fear of appearing lazy, unmotivated, etc. However, if you are taking on work that you cannot complete, you are ultimately doing a disservice to both the firm and yourself.

### 5. Move Your Cases Forward

This point cannot be overemphasized. It is easy to keep busy, but there is a big difference between doing enough to fill your day, and doing constructive work that helps push cases forward to conclusion. Remember that clients are looking for results and they want them quickly. Obviously, depending on the nature of your practice, it can reasonably take months or even years to achieve those results, which most clients understand and accept. What is unacceptable, and often leads to both sub-par results and unhappy clients, is the delay that could have been avoided. To ensure that your work is being completed in a timely manner, create and continuously update a file (or assignment) list, review it regularly, and, most importantly, ensure that every time you work on a file, you do something constructive to move that file forward. What you want to avoid is the situation where you review a file and then, for whatever reason, that file goes back on the shelf without any other action. If you are unsure about what to do next, ask someone. If you become distracted by another matter, ensure that you come back to the file in the immediate future, before time passes and everything must be reviewed again. Not only is it beneficial to your firm to have cases moved forward, unnecessary delay causes nothing but prejudice to the client, who will eventually become exasperated, first with the process and then with you.

### 6. Be a Team Player

Everyone wants to receive credit, especially in a competitive environment like a legal practice. But you will do far better in the long run if you are known as a team player. Don’t look for personal “reward,” go out of your way to accommodate those you work with, help your colleagues whenever you can, and always give others credit for their involvement, however small, in an assignment of yours. Your good work, humility, and “team” approach will all be noticed. On the other hand, your work product may be overshadowed if you develop a reputation of being interested only in promoting yourself.

### 7. Accept The “Joe” Jobs With A Smile

As a junior lawyer, you will inevitably get some assignments that have made their way to you because no one wants them and everyone above you has managed to avoid them. Its not always fair, and sometimes the product of nothing more than laziness on the part of more senior counsel, but it is going to happen. Just keep smiling. The lawyer who assigned you this task probably knows it is a “dog” (even if he or she won’t admit it) and you will be appreciated for getting it done. Do these (and your other assignments) well, and soon your superiors will find someone else to do these unenviable tasks.

### 8. Do Not Be Afraid To Ask For Help

Your supervising lawyer should have an “open door” policy, and you should feel welcome to ask questions. Its part of the learning process and helps ensure that you stay “on track.” There are two caveats. First, you have to be familiar with the file you are asking about – it is not your superior’s job to brief you about background matters you could learn on your own. Second, you must have already made a reasonable effort to find the answer. You will be quite embarrassed if the answer to your question is easily found in the first place you should have looked (procedural details found in the Rules of Civil Procedure are

a prime example). If you have done both these things, feel free to ask.

## 9. Be Nice To Your Staff

Good office staff is a valuable resource. Good staff makes your practice easier and more successful, while less worthy staff will have just the opposite effect. This is particularly true for junior lawyers who will benefit from the experience of secretaries and law clerks, some of whom have been in the industry for many years. Most junior lawyers have never had staff working for them before, and there can be a tendency to treat staff as subservient, or otherwise with a lack of respect. This is a serious mistake! Consider your staff to be valuable members of your team and treat them accordingly. You will find that the quality of their work will be higher, and their motivation to help you during those inevitable emergencies will be greater. Treat your staff with disdain, and ... you can figure out the rest.

## 10. Confront Your Mistakes and Accept Constructive Criticism

While nobody wants to make a mistake, it is going to happen. None of us is perfect. When something has gone wrong, whether the error is big or small, deal with it immediately! Do not bury the problem and hope that it will go away. It won't. If you confront the mistake immediately, there may still be a way to fix or at least minimize the problem. By trying to hide from it, you can rest assured that when you are ultimately required to confront the issue (and you will be) the problem will be much greater. Your delay may even prejudice your insurance coverage in some situations.

One of the inevitable consequences of making an error is that you will receive criticism, hopefully of the constructive variety. Listen to what you are being told, and learn what is expected of you so you can avoid making the same mistake again. As long as your error was not the result of laziness or total carelessness, don't be embarrassed or focus on it endlessly. Your superiors made plenty of mistakes too, perhaps the same ones you have made. Above all else, don't argue or get defensive – accept the fact that you made a mistake, fix it (if you can) and move on.

## 11. Keep Learning

Whatever your practice area, the law is complex and constantly developing. Make sure that you take the time to read the legal literature available to you, which should always include weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines, and seminar materials relevant to your area of practice. It is your obligation to keep up to date on changes in the law, and you will be very happy to avoid uncomfortable situations that can arise from not doing so.

[Top](#)

---

This article originally appeared in the Ontario Bar Association's ([www.oba.org](http://www.oba.org)) November 2004 Young Lawyers' Division Newsletter.

**David J. Levy** is a partner at Howie, Sacks & Henry LLP in Toronto. His practice is devoted to personal injury, medical malpractice and insurance litigation on behalf of seriously injured accident victims. He can be reached at [DavidLevy@hshlawyers.com](mailto:DavidLevy@hshlawyers.com).



What happens when a document becomes evidence?  
Order your FREE Book *Electronic Evidence Management: From Creation through Litigation*.



FREE BOOK

Brought to you by Fios



March 2012

ABA LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT SECTION  
MARKETING • MANAGEMENT • TECHNOLOGY • FINANCE

# Law Practice TODAY

## Twenty Lessons for Lawyers Starting Their Careers

[Dennis Kennedy](#)

March 2005

Nobody hands you an instruction manual or a playbook when you start your legal career. Much of what you need to know is not told to you. Much of what you need to know is learned the hard way, often from making mistakes. Sometimes you are being evaluated on how well you perform when no one gives you instructions and sometimes it's just the case that no one is giving you any instructions.

In my legal career, I've been in big firms and smaller firms. I've been a summer associate, an associate and a partner. I've run a firm's summer program and I've been involved in hiring. I've seen a lot and, from time to time, I've tried to put together the lessons I've learned.

Sometimes you are not ready for the lesson. Sometimes you think you know the lesson, but you later realize that there was a different lesson that you weren't able to see until later. Some lessons are painful, but many come from other lawyer's generously sharing their experiences.

In the spirit of sharing lessons, I offer 20 lessons I now think that I have learned about starting the practice of law and, in particular, working at a law firm.

**1. Learn the culture.** Your most important job from the time you accept a job is to learn the culture of the organization you are joining. Although most people focus so much on getting the job that they neglect to notice much about the culture of a firm before they start, it is a good idea to make some observations about the culture of a firm even in the interviews. After you start working at firm, you want to put a lot of effort into learning the culture of the firm.

The “myths” and “legends” of the firm can help you out. If the managing partners of the firm shared a table in the library for their first few years in the firm, you’ll want to hesitate before you demand new furniture. An oft-repeated tale of a female partner who called into the office within an hour of giving birth to a child can give you a clue as to what lawyers will think of your request for substantial paternity leave.

You’ll want to learn what to wear, what hours you really need to work, whose opinions matter most and, especially, what major mistakes that associates who are no longer with the firm made. You will also want to start to develop a sense of what partners have in common, what made them partners and whether any of those things appeal or apply to you.

How do you do this? Talk to people and listen carefully to the stories. I recommend starting with the people who interviewed you. It’s safe to assume that they liked you. Make efforts to know people outside your department. If you have to work on Saturdays, don’t be afraid to stop by someone’s office and introduce yourself and ask them about themselves and what they like about the firm. Get them to tell you stories.

**2. Begin the search for a mentor.** The one thing that became crystal clear to me is that your success and happiness in law or any other profession depends on finding and maintaining mentor relationships. Over the long term, finding a mentor is the most important thing you can do when starting your career.

Despite books and articles that have been written about how to find mentors or, worse, how to put someone on the spot and ask him or her to be your mentor, finding a mentor is a mysterious process that takes time and often evolves organically.

In the interview process, you are likely to see people who may one day fit the bill. I wouldn't "target" them, but I would make an effort to get to know them and to work with them. There can be disappointments – people aren't what they seem, great attorneys may not be great people, and, as I found, people do die unexpectedly.

You want to find that person who can teach you not only the law, but ethics, respect for people and the law, honor and the "little" things like that. You want to hear their stories, understand their insights, and earn and experience their faith in you. In the right case, the right person will be willing to share all that. There's no more important key to your career. There's a great Eastern proverb I'm fond of: "when the student is ready, the teacher will come." Prepare yourself to be ready.

**3. You get all the feedback you ask for.** Feedback means different things to different people. In four years of running a summer program for my old firm, I spent a lot of time talking about "recognizing" feedback. This is another reason why learning the culture of your firm and the traits of individual attorneys is so important. Many attorneys will say nothing about your work and continue to give you more and more work. To you, this can be frustrating. In their minds, they have given you the highest form of feedback. "If I didn't like the work, I wouldn't give them more." They don't realize that most of us need to hear the words.

Even for the well-intentioned lawyer, demands get in the way of providing the kind of feedback attorneys want to give. Remember to ask. No one really minds someone who is sincere asking for a few minutes to talk about an assignment.

Don't make assumptions about the feedback you get. A hearty "great job" and no specific comments may disguise the fact someone can't believe what a poor job you did and just wants to get you moved on to someone else. I was notorious for telling people sincerely that they had done an excellent job and handing a document back to them in which it seemed I had changed something in every sentence. I was utterly sincere – they had done a great job in giving me something I could easily tailor to *my* audience. I had to work on my presentation to convey my message in a better way.

Assigning attorneys often want you to produce something that advances the process, gives them something to work with and allows them a good framework to make stylistic changes for the intended audience. I learned that it can be hard for people to hear the compliments when all they see is a sea of corrections.

A good pointer is to be persistent in asking for specifics. You need to ask why something is a good job when you can't see why it is. Learning from others about an attorney's style can be a big help.

**4. Write for the right audience.** Nothing gets new lawyers into more trouble than writing for the wrong audience. An attorney who wants a 3-page memo will never be happy with a memo that looks like a law review article, no matter how good it may be. Writing for clients is an art. Unfortunately, none of this is typically learned in law school.

The key: look at models. Ask for a letter like the one you are supposed to write. Ask the assigning attorney for an example of a memo he or she liked. Talk about who the intended audience is. Then, make sure that you do what the assigning attorney tells you he or she wants.

When I ran a summer program, I gave my own independent evaluation of the summer interns' written work by taking it home the night before the review and reading it all at once with the TV on before I went to bed. I felt

that that approach gave me the perspective of a typical harried, tired and distracted attorney who wanted to know what the main points are. If I could tell what the memo was about and what its main points were, I knew someone had done a great job. Be clear, concise and make it easier to find your main points and conclusions. Oh, yeah, attorneys really are looking for your conclusions. Remember to give them.

**5. Learn the lines of gossip and be careful.** It always amazed me that even after I warned them about revealing too much of their personal lives, I'd see summer associates and young attorneys talking about the travails of his or her love life, his or her latest hangover, and teenage indiscretions with the very staff members who were most likely to spread the story all over the place and to either distort or embellish it in the process. Use good judgment. In any firm, you should assume that the personal secrets you disclose will make the rounds of the firm quickly in a somewhat distorted form that will emphasize the scandalous aspects. That's not a comment on any person or any firm; it just happens. Let me repeat a word that you want to know and understand: JUDGMENT.

**6. The first few months will be physically exhausting.** The biggest surprise new attorneys have is how physically tiring it is to work. This may come as a surprise, but sitting at a desk working all day, often ten hours or more a day, will wear you out until you get accustomed to it. This happens to everyone.

You get tired in the afternoon and soon find that you are nodding off at home at 8:00 at night on a regular basis. I don't know many young attorneys who didn't think that they were getting mono after their first few months of work. You get used to it, but it takes a while. Physical exercise, going out to lunch, and walking around the office to take a break can help.

**7. Be yourself . . . within reason.** Everybody wants to be their own person, but you have to use common sense and good judgment.

Surprisingly, the worst mistake you can make is to try to fit yourself into what you imagine the organization's mode to be. First, you won't get it right. Second, you'll give people a sense that you are inauthentic.

Here's an example. A friend of mine and I became partners in my old firm at about the same time. The only thing we clearly had in common was that we both came in very early in the morning and there were only a few lawyers who did that. Shortly thereafter, the early morning hours were populated by bleary-eyed associates who decided that early morning hours were a key to the partnership mix. They came to their senses fairly quickly.

There are many ways to express yourself as an individual within the framework of the normal culture of the firm. You can buy many different shades of gray suits, for example. Seriously, though, a big issue in any organization is "fit." You do a disservice to yourself and to the firm by not being yourself.

Life is short – you don't want to trap yourself at a place that doesn't fit you. Remember that it is possible that you made the wrong choice of employers.

**8. Attitude matters.** A general rule of thumb is that an attitude of entitlement will kill your chances at most firms. Your work is just beginning – lawyers don't really respect the work you did in law school. You are definitely back at square one and have to prove yourself all over again.

An attitude that indicates that you have made it, that you are ready to reap the benefits of your education immediately and a sense that you don't have something else to earn, will cause you nothing but problems. You want to be self-confident, but humble, willing to learn, respectful of your position and ready to work.

Imagine two new attorneys doing the identical work on a document and the documents having identical typos and mistakes. If you have a good attitude, communicate with the assigning attorney and show a willingness to learn, I guarantee that the worst comment you'll get is that it was a good effort. If you have a "bad" attitude, act like you know it all and that the project is beneath you, you risk someone questioning whether you even have the ability to be a lawyer.

**9. Learn your place in the pecking order.** I used to joke in the hiring process that we should hire military veterans because they knew that you started at the bottom and earned your way up the ladder. Resist the inclination to see yourself on a level well above paralegals, secretaries and staff.

Everyone plays a different role and the values of these roles are not determined by title. If you've been at a firm for a few months and get into a situation where you force a partner to choose between supporting you or the secretary he or she has had for ten years and relies on in ways you can't even imagine (until you have a secretary you rely on for ten years), I guarantee that 100% of the time the partner will support the secretary. It's a showdown you can't win – don't try to force it.

Classic mistake: a partner assigns a project to you that you know in your heart is "paralegal work." You stew about it for a while, talk to other associates who commiserate you, and, almost inevitably, walk down to a paralegal where you all but throw the assignment on his or her desk as you "delegate" the project back to the paralegal.

In almost every case, one thing has happened and three other things will happen. The assigning attorney has already had a discussion with the paralegal and there is a reason you got the work. The second thing is that before you get back to your desk, the paralegal will be telling the assigning attorney what you did. The third thing is that you will soon get a pointed lecture on how projects given to you are meant to be done by you. The fourth thing is that the next time the paralegal has a choice of making your job easier or harder, he or she will probably let you take the more difficult route.

**10. Trivial-seeming projects are given to you for a reason.** Many attorneys spent their early years doing work that is now routinely done by paralegals. Trips to the court to file documents allowed them to learn procedures and make friends at the court. Recording deeds and searching land records allowed them to learn the processes involved. Trips to distant courts got them out of the office for a few hours. I have fond memories of this and it baffles me how some young attorneys seem to want to duck this type of work.

You'll later learn that more thought than you ever imagined went into the choice of projects you were given and that there is a training process going on. Don't get indignant that you are a lawyer and feel that above certain assignments – look for lessons to learn. There are plenty of them.

**11. Make life a little easier for older attorneys.** I gradually grew to realize that many older lawyers are uncomfortable with one-on-one lunches, especially with members of the opposite sex or people young enough to be their children. It's a cultural thing, but it helps to respect it. Invite a group of people or include a peer. They may well be more uncomfortable than you are.

**12. Don't turn in rough drafts.** Almost every attorney has a story to illustrate this point. My story is fairly common. On the last day I worked before heading off for Christmas vacation during law school, an attorney asked me to do a rush project that he had to deal with the next day. I explained my situation and he said, "That's fine. Give me whatever you find, your handwritten notes, anything, I don't care if it's typed. I'd rather that I just get your research." On my return, I found that he hadn't looked at the materials I gave him for two weeks and, when he did, complained to everyone about the unprofessional work I had done and his disbelief that I'd given him anything handwritten. Well, you live and learn. Get things polished up. With computers, hardly any young attorney ever writes anything in longhand, so this little rite of passage may be disappearing.

The moral of the story: get written work into as polished and as standard a form as you can and at least write "draft" across the top.

**13. Make the IS people your friends.** I can assure you that, rightly or wrongly, the technology "needs" of new associates are not at the top of any firm's technology agenda. Don't assume that someone is looking out for your technology interests. In fact, you will undoubtedly see many cases where the best technology goes to people who have the least need to use it.

Meet the IS people. Help them out. When you need some help or there's an opportunity to get better technology, you'll have a sympathetic ear and you'll be talking to the person who can help you out.

**14. Learn the best ways to get to talk to individual attorneys.** You have a question you need to have answered by the assigning attorney. As far as you can tell, his telephone is glued to his ear. What do you do?

You have to learn strategies. It might be e-mail. It might be a phone call. It might be hanging outside his door like a lost dog until he is off the phone and then charging in. Generally, an attorney's secretary is the best resource, but talk to others who do work for the attorney. You'll find that those in the know will have ways to get his or her attention. You need to learn how to be one of those in the know.

**15. Speaking at client meetings.** You see more young attorneys go up in flames in this situation than any other. Understand that the client sees you as expensive surplusage in the meeting and doesn't really want to see you there. You don't want to remind clients why they think that way. You can also cause a lot of problems in ways that you simply will not be able understand until several years later when you are at a different firm.

Here are a few good rules:

Speak only when spoken to. I always believed that you went into the meeting with the client seeing you as the bright, young (although expensive) attorney. It's easier than you think to change that opinion for the worse.

There is no joke that you can tell that will be a guaranteed winner. Don't even think about taking the risk.

Never correct the lead attorney no matter how wrong you think he or she is. It's more likely that you are wrong. Mention it after the meeting – the attorney will make the call to the client if a correction is necessary. If you have an established relationship with an attorney, you might have ways to raise a question so that the attorney has a chance to reconsider, but be careful. If you notice that another lawyer is calling the client by the wrong name or referring to the wrong case, you might want to slip a note under his or her nose.

Most of the time, you will be invited to attend a meeting to take notes and to observe and learn how to conduct a meeting. Do that. The fact that you won the client counseling competition in law school does not give you a license to think you've learned it all.

If you are asked to summarize your research for a client, try to hit the main points and finish within a minute. If the client has further questions, he or she will ask. Almost no client will want to hear about the fascinating distinction you've found between two obscure cases on a tangential point. The client is thinking action steps and doesn't want to be reminded about how much they are paying for you to research obscure point and talk in a language he or she can't understand.

The bottom line: talk with the lead attorney about what he or she wants you to do in the meeting.

**16. Report back after a few hours.** If your project is taking too long, let the assigning attorney know. You'll get mixed signals on many projects. An attorney will say that the research will take about two hours, but that you have to be sure to get the right answer, no matter what. Forty hours later, you may have your answer, but when the attorney sees your time record, he or she will hit the roof.

Give a status report. Ask for more direction. Re-engage the attorney in the project. Make sure you understand what is being asked.

By the way, if the research would have taken a few minutes or hours, the attorney would have done it himself or herself. You should expect not to find easy answers. Also, it is really difficult for experienced attorneys to estimate accurately how long it will take a young attorney to do a project.

**17. The two-year rule.** I learned that it takes about two years of practice to feel like your getting the hang of things. Unfortunately, about two years later, realize that you really didn't know very much two years earlier. However, it is a significant and confidence-building milestone in your career.

**18. Think about Tom Peters' resume rule.** In his book, *The Circle of Innovation*, Tom Peters talks about looking at your resume on a regular basis and assessing at least annually what you've added in the way of specific projects to your resume. Think of the three or four resume-enhancing projects that you've done each year and write short summaries of each of them and your role in them. It is wise to update your resume every year, even if you are not actively looking for a job. I suggest that you keep that updated resume on your home computer and not on the office network.

**19. Keep developing networks.** For many reasons, young lawyers change jobs frequently. Don't get so caught up in the law firm's cocoon that you neglect outside relationships that can help you if you have to leave or the firm merges or changes drastically. Bar activities and alumni networks are good ways to proceed.

**20. Get involved in the firm.** Part of becoming a partner in any firm is getting out of passive "I'm-just-an-employee" way of thinking. You want to be at a place where you feel like it is *your* firm. One good way to start to get involved is to help out with interviewing. Another thing is to volunteer to be part of committees. Show that you are interested in the firm. Partners like to see associates who are committed to the firm itself and don't give the sense of "just passing through."

Learning the law necessary to do your job is hard enough, but don't neglect the work you need to do to learn how to practice law. Be observant, listen carefully and test your assumptions. You will have plenty of mistakes from which you can learn many of your own lessons, but consider the lessons I learned. I hope that by teaching you some of the lessons I learned, you can have an easier time in some of those areas and concentrate your energies on some of the other areas that deserve your time and attention.

[Back to Top](#)

---

**Dennis Kennedy** ([dmk@denniskennedy.com](mailto:dmk@denniskennedy.com)) is a well-known legal technology expert, technology lawyer and blogger (<http://www.denniskennedy.com/blog/>). He is an award-winning author and speaker on these topics and a member of the ABA's Law Practice Management Section's TECHSHOW Board, Webzine Board and Council. Earlier versions of some of these lessons appeared in Kimm Alayne Walton's *What Law School Doesn't Teach You: But You Really Need to Know*.

[Current Issue](#) | [About](#) | [Article Archives](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contribute](#) | [RSS/XML](#) | [Contact](#)  
© 2003-2005 [American Bar Association](#) | [Privacy Statement](#)