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Lessons Learned From an Associate's First Year

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Special to the Legal

My first year as an associate attorney went faster than I ever could have imagined. I worked toward being a skilled attorney, and I have learned how to effectively interact with other professionals, how to manage my time so that my fiancé, family and friends don't forget who I am, and how to accept constructive criticism without bursting into tears.

Below are a few examples of lessons learned as a first-year associate.

Beer, Liquor or Wine?

I was working for the firm for less than a week when I was asked if I wanted to attend the annual Musmanno Dinner, hosted by the Philadelphia Trial Lawyers Association. Not one to turn down a free meal, I agreed and went home to pick out my most professional suit and jewelry for the occasion. I arrived at the location of the dinner with the partners in my firm as the cocktail hour was beginning. When asked what I would like to drink, I instantly panicked. How was I supposed to know if my standard Coors Light would be an acceptable beverage choice in a room filled with prominent attorneys and judges? I don't typically enjoy liquor drinks, but what if that's what I'm supposed to like? Wine instantly makes my face red, so did I want to look like I had just come from the tanning salon?



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A seemingly harmless question from a co-worker had turned into some kind of Sophie's Choice moment for me. Not wanting to appear unprofessional based purely on my drink choice, I ended up replying (after what seemed like an eternity), "I'll have whatever you're having." When my co-worker returned with two beers, I breathed a sigh of relief and made sure I was careful not to chug it down, considering I was now extremely parched.

After a little while, I realized that I had not said a word beyond "nice to meet you" in over a half-hour, something quite uncharacteristic of me. I am not normally shy, but I had never felt so intimidated in my life. Here I was, possibly the youngest in the room, surrounded by some of the best attorneys in the city for the first time in my career. This

was an amazing opportunity to let people know who I was while in a relaxed environment (at least for them). Instead of being the fly on the wall (or in my case, the shadow of my co-worker), I began interacting in conversations and giving people a reason to remember who I was. Cocktail hour then flew by and dinner proceeded. After a delicious meal and engaging conversation, I returned to my car, relieved that I had survived my first professional dinner experience.

Since then, I have attended numerous events and have gotten over my fears. Networking will always be an important part of the legal profession, so I am grateful for every opportunity I have to interact with other attorneys (especially when food is involved).

Write? Wrong

Throughout my life and law school career, I routinely did well on writing assignments. For whatever reason, I enjoy writing and my grades have always reflected that. However, law school writing assignments were sparse, with only a handful of major papers due a year. As we all know, legal writing is a completely different ballgame, with proper citations, footnotes, italics, parentheticals, etc. So after I turned over my first writing assignment, a mediation memo, I was obviously nervous. I had never written anything like that before, nor had I even heard of a mediation memo (embarrassingly enough).

When I opened up the Word document the next day and saw all of the red markings and comments, my stomach dropped. Was I not as good a writer as I thought? Was I not cut out for this profession at all? Had I lost my ability to research effectively? Questions were swirling through my head as I reviewed each comment and wrote my own questions down. I made the corrections and stayed late that night to review and review again, before resubmitting my assignment.

I eventually met with my boss to go over everything. I wanted to know what I had done wrong, and what he preferred I do. I wanted to learn from my mistakes—plus, I wanted to show I knew how to take constructive criticism without becoming defensive or upset. He was extremely helpful and I took a lot from that meeting to apply to future assignments. It had nothing to do with my inability to write; it was more about my basic legal inexperience and lack of familiarity with that particular case.

As time has gone on, I have worked to improve my writing skills and techniques with each assignment I am asked to do. I recently re-read that first mediation memo I wrote over a year ago and was amazed at how different of a writer I had become. I still try to ask as many questions as I can, and while I'm sure some days my questions drive my boss nuts (I'm known to rapidly send email after email), it is one of the best ways to learn in this field. I know I am not quite there yet, but I believe I am certainly on my way to becoming a true legal writer.

Organizing

"For every minute spent organizing, an hour is earned," according to a saying often attributed to Benjamin Franklin.

I have always loved calendars, lists and anything that helps organize my

life. Post-It Notes and highlighters and colored tabs are the well-known keys to my heart. My email account contains multiple folders, one for each client, and my personal folder on my computer is broken down into subcategories and is color coded. These folders and organizational techniques were all done on my first day at work. I could not begin working until I had a place to put everything, whether it was in email form, an electronic document or a hard copy.

But I am glad I began organized, because it has helped me stay organized and has helped me manage my time. I make a copy of every assignment and put it in my personal folder, organized by either law or document type. After more than a year, I now have an array of examples of motions in limine and responses to summary judgment and discovery requests, just to name a few. Additionally, my law folder is broken down into federal, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, which allows me to quickly peruse when I am working on something or trying to find a quick answer. Having a directory of past assignments and memos is a big help, and I can then avoid conducting repetitive research or preparing documents from scratch.

The firm uses a calendar that allows us all to view each other's appointments and to-do lists, as well as link each individual appointment with a specific client. This calendar was a dream come true for me. I put every single assignment I receive on this calendar, which allows me to not only stay on track, but when my boss asks what I have going on, I can quickly look at it and let him know. Plus, there is that satisfaction I get from checking things off as "done."

Staying organized is huge in the time-management realm. Knowing exactly what I have to do and when

it is due helps me prioritize my assignments and my life. I can easily let my fiancé know if I will be home late or if I will just be sleeping under my desk instead. With a new job, a new home, planning a wedding and just dealing with the other obstacles life has thrown at me, I can't imagine how crazy I would appear to my friends, family and co-workers if I didn't obsess over my calendars and lists. Embracing some form of organization, whether it is a calendar, a list or subfolders and directories, can help lessen the overwhelming effects of the life of an associate and improve one's confidences in the work place.

The practice of law comes with a learning curve, especially for a first-year associate. Law schools don't teach you everything you need to know for that first year, but hopefully newly admitted attorneys can find jobs with helpful bosses and colleagues to provide guidance and support. I know as time goes on, life will become more difficult and complicated, but I hope that I have learned how to efficiently and successfully manage whatever comes my way. I will continue to ask questions, continue to be Staples' best customer, and I will continue to learn and grow as an attorney. •

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