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The 7 Essential Rules For Ambitious Associates

By Juan Carlos Rodriguez

Law360, New York (July 30, 2014, 4:20 PM ET) -- To take the next step up the career ladder, law firm associates need to understand that serving partners is at least as important as serving clients.

Although it can seem daunting to handle the pressure of doing excellent work while striving to please partners as well as clients, finding a niche in which to develop an expertise, successfully rebounding from setbacks and having a life outside work are all necessary to stand out from the rest of the crowd and make your mark as a fledgling attorney.

James Durham, chief marketing and business development officer at Littler Mendelson PC, has spent years interviewing clients and attorneys to gather information about best practices. He said associates should remember they have two equally important clients: the lawyers in the firm and any client with whom they have any contact.

"I tell associates all the time, you have one of the hardest jobs in the world, because you have two very challenging clients and you have to serve them both. So it's a high bar," he said.

Here are seven ways associates can get noticed:

Treat Assignments as Pieces of a Whole

Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan LLP partner A. William Urquhart said the most critical thing associates can do to stand out is to take ownership of the matters to which they've been assigned.

"Start thinking immediately about the big picture, not only the small part you've been asked to take a look at," Urquhart said. "Look at the litigation as if it were your own, and as if you were running it. Think strategically about next steps. Because in the end, your job as an associate is to make the partner more effective."

Durham said associates who stand out are the ones who anticipate what's next and bring that to the partner's attention.

He suggested associates should take the initiative to come to the partner during the drafting of a brief, for example, and offer a draft email or letter that could accompany the brief when it's transmitted to the client. Or an associate, recognizing that a debriefing session may be in order at the conclusion of a matter, could pull together a list of all the people who've worked on it and offer that to the partner.

"Anything that demonstrates a broader understanding of the context of the work and a broader understanding of the way in which everything needs to move forward is valuable," Durham said.

Don't Be a Wallflower

Urquhart said partners rely on associates in many ways, not least of which is for clear and accurate communication about work progress and developments.

"Typically, the associate is going to be enmeshed in the details of a lawsuit to a much greater extent than the partner is. So it's critical that the partner be able to depend upon the associate for advice. And that advice not only includes doing your narrow assignment, it includes telling your partner when he's wrong or going down the wrong trail," he said.

Asking questions is also important, according to J. Bradley Keck, a partner at Mayer Brown LLP in charge of U.S. hiring. Often, associates can feel intimidated by the work and the environment they have found themselves in once they land a job at a firm. He said a good new associate will ask questions, especially to

make sure they understand their assignments.

And Durham said one common mistake associates make is to wait until the last minute to bring up a serious issue or problem.

"If you cannot deliver when you say you will, you have to communicate that in advance. But it is not as common as you might think for someone at the associate level, the afternoon before something is due, to say, 'Here's what I've run into, and here's why I might need until tomorrow evening or the following morning,'" he said.

Be Confident

Entering into the workplace at a law firm can be overwhelming, both professionally and personally. So it's especially important to maintain a sense of self in both arenas.

Urquhart said there's a tendency for associates to imitate a partner they've worked with and come to admire, especially in the courtroom.

"And that's a mistake," he said. "You bring your own personality to the courtroom, not somebody else's. That's acting."

As an associate at Wiley Rein LLP, Jerita L. DeBraux Salley said she has learned that self-confidence is a part of the job.

"Often, as a young associate, since you're so new to the field and the practice group, it's hard to be confident, because you are still getting your bearings and learning how things work, both substantively and procedurally. But as an attorney, you need to project confidence in all situations. This is what clients, senior associates and partners are looking for when they work with you," she said.

And Daniel J. Mitchell, a shareholder who runs the summer associate program and sits on the hiring committee at Bernstein Shur Sawyer & Nelson PA, said associates should try to have a life outside the office.

"When people are more well-rounded and they've got things going on outside the office that fill out other parts of their lives, that makes them better workers and better to be around in the office," he said.

Take On More Responsibility

Dorsey & Whitney LLP associate Jesse D. Sixkiller and DeBraux Salley both said they have found it helpful to volunteer for public speaking engagements.

"The more you engage in public speaking events, the more comfortable you are doing it, and when you're more comfortable, you're confident, and when you're confident, people believe what you're saying. This applies across the board, whether your audience is a group of peers, a client or a judge," DeBraux Salley said.

Sixkiller said that when an associate can give competent presentations to both firm members and clients, it shows a good understanding of a certain subject matter, and then an associate can become a go-to person for that area.

Amy Laurendeau, a partner and hiring manager at O'Melveny & Myers LLP, said associates should also pursue pro bono and in-firm committee work.

"Pro bono work develops skill and experience that they might not otherwise be able to get early on," she said. "It often allows associates to get stand-up trial experience, appellate arguments and experience on critical, cutting-edge topics and issues that regular clients would not often be involved with."

She said working on firm committees is a good way to establish a reputation as a leader within the office and the firm and to get to know firm leaders and lawyers in other offices that may not be in your practice group and you may not otherwise have an opportunity to work with.

Understand Client Business

Joan M. Fortin, a shareholder and the director of attorney recruiting at Bernstein Shur, said associates should learn to think like their clients.

"I think it's really important for lawyers to understand their clients' business and to understand their business goals, and to try to be a partner to help the client achieve their goals," Fortin said.

Teri O'Brien, a Paul Hastings LLP partner and co-chair of attorney development, said she's received a lot of feedback from clients that they expect their law firms not only to be service providers, but also to be partners and understand their business.

"When we're doing work for them, we're trying to be more strategic. And the only way to do that is if you know a lot about the company and what their goals are, if you understand the market, and if you understand their competition," she said.

Associates can do that by keeping up with local business journals or subscribing to an online service so they get press releases or other statements in real time.

Invest in Success of Partners

Brandon Davis, who just made equity partner at Phelps Dunbar LLP in December, said associates should realize their success depends in large part on the success of the partners for whom they work.

"At the associate level, it's really all about servicing the partners that you work for," Davis said. "You have to have a willingness to invest in making someone else successful. And take ownership in the work you're providing to a partner. If you can do that, then the partner understands that you're part of the team, that you get it. And you're establishing loyalty."

Slam-Dunk the Basic Tasks

Mayer Brown's Keck said associates should try to "control the controllable."

"Get the easy stuff right. When you write a two-sentence email, make sure the spelling is accurate, that it's punctuated correctly and that it shows a level of professionalism. You're not going to have to structure a deal or come up with the winning argument on your first day, but you're going to have to control what you can," Keck said.

Dorsey & Whitney's Sixkiller said that because some of the work associates are assigned can be monotonous, it's important not to fall into the trap of just going through the motions.

"I encourage junior associates to always use and keep up with critical analysis. Learning from what you're reviewing, staying engaged, and seeing how it all fits into the bigger picture shows you have a good understanding of how everything works," Sixkiller said.

And O'Brien said it might seem basic, but it's always good for an associate to make sure he or she is proofreading, meeting deadlines and keeping the lines of communication open.

"That way you are really being judged on your work product and you don't fall on your face before someone gets to it," she said.

--Editing by Jeremy Barker and Philip Shea.

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