

6 Traps To Avoid During Your First Few Years Of Law

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (October 20, 2016, 11:45 AM EDT) -- First-year BigLaw associates leave law school brimming with confidence and a shiny new degree, but experts say many are unaware of the pitfalls that lurk ahead as they navigate their fledgling career paths.

One misstep as a junior associate can damage a lawyer's reputation, create friction with firm partners or lead to other career disasters. And attorneys say the skills that allowed them to succeed in school may not be sufficient to prevent a major misstep during their first few years practicing.

"Very bright and successful men and women leave law schools and enter law firms every year. And every year, many bright people who have never previously experienced failure actually do fail at law firms," said Amanda Martinsek, a partner at Ice Miller LLP.

Here are six tips for young lawyers from veterans on making it through the first few years of practice without creating careerlong regrets.

Not Admitting Weakness

Some associates who join large law firms fail to understand that they are only at the very beginning of learning how to be good lawyers, according to Martinsek.

"They enter the practice of law thinking that they know what they are doing instead of appreciating just how much they have to learn," she said. "Young lawyers who do not know just how much they don't know usually fall behind their more humble — or more realistic — colleagues."

Katherine Dudley Helms, office managing shareholder of Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoak & Stewart PC's Columbia, South Carolina office, says that when junior associates fail to admit their weaknesses, they often create a worse situation for themselves and for the partners they are supposed to be helping.

She says a major pitfall during the first few years of practice is trying to do everything and not letting the lead attorney know when deadline concerns crop up.

"The worst thing a lead counsel can hear at the eleventh and a half hour is, 'I tried but cannot get this completed,' or get a weak work product that was too hastily put together," Dudley Helms said.

She explained that while partners do want associates to take initiative, there are things associates do not yet know and many work situations that require decisions or direction from someone with more experience.

"If an associate has a workload that concerns [them] about meeting deadlines, it is better to engage a shareholder early to help with priority-setting or getting help, if necessary," she said.

Failing to Ask for Feedback

Young attorneys who fail to communicate with partners and other managers about the quality of their performance can easily be thrown off track, according to Sean Wajert, the managing partner of Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP's Philadelphia office.

"With busy partners, associates may not always get the feedback they deserve, but they typically will get the feedback they ask for," Wajert said. "Young associates need to develop an effective two-way communication pattern in the firm."

He explained that while many associates at larger law firms take the view that "no news is good news," they should instead proactively approach partners to find out what they could do better, adding that, in his view, associates should take all feedback and reviews as constructive.

"How is it better for the associate if the partner was not satisfied and the associate doesn't know it? Most partners will treat the request for feedback as showing the associate wants to learn and improve," he said.

Good communication practices also include attending firm functions and circulating to meet senior attorneys rather than standing in a corner, Wajert says.

"Young associates need to learn when and how to speak up at firm, practice group and client meetings," he said. "Evolving from an early 'speak when spoken to' stance, associates should watch midlevel and senior associate examples of when to chime in and how."

Botching Time Management

Developing an unparalleled ability to manage time well is essential for young lawyers, according to Martinsek.

The reasons for why associates fail to produce the quality and volume of work partners expect of them are numerous, she said, but it is one of the biggest reasons otherwise intelligent and savvy lawyers find their careers have come off-track.

"For the assigning attorney, the reason for disappointment is usually unimportant. What does matter is the waterfall effect of the fallout from not having what is needed when it is needed," she said. "Developing a reputation as unreliable is often fatal."

An associate may be a perfectionist and will take much longer than necessary to turn over the work, according to Martinsek. But the key is finding a balance. Rushing to finish projects at the expense of accuracy is equally harmful, she said.

"Assigning attorneys rarely give points for getting a project back early but are always troubled by

incomplete, inaccurate or sloppy work product. A lightning-quick response does not impress me if I have to send it back for further development," she said.

Displaying a Bad Attitude

In law, relationships are everything, experts say. That's why developing a reputation as someone with a bad attitude can be especially harmful to a young lawyer's career.

"Attitude matters. If someone is difficult or resistant to taking on assignments, even bad ones, he or she might not get the good ones [in the future]," Dudley Helms said.

Wajert says the qualities that partners value in associates, such as an enthusiastic and professional attitude, mirror the qualities clients will value from those associates later in their careers.

"An attitude that indicates that the associate already has arrived, has it made, has nothing to learn, will not serve them well," he said. "Young associates should have a humble self-confidence and be eager and willing to learn."

He described some facets of what he believes to be a good attitude for associates looking to build successful careers: They can initiate conversations about clients and cases, offer suggestions proactively, ask questions, and simply express appreciation for being included on a team or given a certain project, he says.

They can also treat every assignment as an important and requiring their best efforts, and should not take informal approaches, substituting their own judgment about how important the work is, he added.

"Associates should do their best to always have an attitude of hunger and enthusiasm for the work, even when given routine assignments," Wajert said.

Losing Sight of the Big Picture

Associates should be proactive about their careers, even as they are just beginning, according to Dudley Helms.

"Most larger firms have expectations for each level of associate. Learn what those are, and if you are not getting the opportunities to move to the next level, look for the needed opportunities," she said. "Go to shareholders and let them know that you would appreciate an opportunity for the type of assignment [that will lead to advancement]."

Another way associates can take the bull by the horns and impact the trajectory of their careers is by learning everything they can about business development, Wajert says.

"Associates need to keep in mind that the law firm is a business. This is reflected not only in billable-hour targets, but in how the firm staffs matters for clients," he said. "Similarly, it's common for younger lawyers to fail to develop good habits, to fail to establish a foundation, for business development as a part of their practice of law early on."

Even though younger associates aren't expected to bring in major new matters, that doesn't mean they should just forget about the business of law, he says.

"Young attorneys can grow their contact list, be active in legal organizations or associations, secure a rainmaking mentor within their firm, and over time, learn ways to demonstrate they are evolving from doing assignments for the partner into assisting the firm's client with important legal challenges," Wajert said.

Not Practicing Good Firm Etiquette

The little things matter when it comes to building a solid reputation and strong relationships in a law firm, according to Donald Prophete, a name partner at Constangy Brooks Smith & Prophete LLP. That's why associates should be sure to abide by all of the unspoken customs and conventions at their firms.

First, associates should always carry their phones with them and regularly check email and voicemails, even on weekends, he says.

"There is nothing more frustrating than a partner unable to reach his associate during a moment of need," he said. "Conversely, an associate who is reliably available during these moments creates strong bonds of trusts with her partners."

Additionally, he suggested that associates avoid working behind closed doors in their offices both so that they can be seen working hard and so they can socialize and bond with their colleagues.

"The old aphorism 'out of sight, out of mind' clearly applies to their workplace opportunities when they consistently work behind closed doors," Prophete said.

Dudley Helms added a few etiquette suggestions of her own. She says associates should strive to look professional every day for every event, and meld their appearances to their firms' particular styles.

She added that they should also never look at their cellphones when meeting with people.

"Unless the president of the U.S. is going to contact you, it can wait," she said.

Finally: "Show up early, stay late," Dudley Helms said. "You won't get the work if you aren't around when the shareholders are."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Rebecca Flanagan.