

PUBLICATION

Crash Course: What Law School Didn't Teach Us About the Practice of Law

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Law school has you covered when it comes to the rules of civil procedure or evidence. Law school will also help you polish your resume and interviewing skills to make sure you land a good job. What law schools often miss is the opportunity to give students the inside scoop on things that will help them thrive no matter where their career takes them. We've learned a few things throughout our legal career paths that we're sharing to fill in the gaps of what law school didn't teach us that will help you become a top performer.

Don't Let Your Career Happen to You – Take Ownership

When it comes to your education and career, you can either be a passenger or the pilot. Opportunities are out there, but you can't rely on people to keep you top of mind for them. Take the initiative to ask questions and try new things. New attorneys can fall into the trap of thinking that they have to pay their dues and take whatever hand they are dealt when it comes to salary, rates, the type of work you're given and the meetings you're invited to. While there will be a period of learning and adapting, you should not be afraid to make your goals known and ask for help in achieving them. You'll stand out if you show that you are thinking about where your career is headed and how it fits in with the bigger picture of your organization.

Having a Support Team Requires Authenticity

Have you ever seen a race car driver complete a race without a pit crew? Of course not. To be successful, you need a team of people around you. Building and maintaining relationships is critical to thriving in this stressful, fast-paced profession. At some point, you'll need someone to have your back and give you advice. If you're aspiring to become a leader in the industry, your relationships with the people who will become the decisionmakers can make a big difference, and the most important aspect of meaningful relationship building is authenticity. If people don't know you, they can't help you. Be intentional and open, and stay in touch with law school professors and classmates. Be honest with your mentors, sponsors and other contacts about what you are facing and where you want to go in your career.

Become an "Expert" Early

Establishing yourself as the "go-to person" in your environment is a great way to market yourself as a new lawyer. If you are lucky enough to have identified an area of interest early on, consider taking relevant courses or participating in programs (e.g., moot court and specialized law journals) while in law school if you have flexibility in your schedule. That way, you have a baseline of knowledge to jump right in when you start practicing. If you are already practicing, then learn as much as you can in your downtime. Many organizations and bar associations offer free continuing legal education (CLE) courses and pro bono opportunities. Identifying and exploring an area of interest or skill will eventually draw internal and external recognition that will make you a value-add to any team.

Keep Business Development and Professional Networking Top of Mind

The idea of developing business and growing a professional network can be daunting even for the experienced lawyer. However, as a law student or new lawyer, it is imperative to start planting those seeds early and often. While in law school, or in your first few years of practice, consider joining (and remaining actively involved in) organizations like local bar associations, or participating in volunteer projects that advance missions that you

believe in. This will give you the opportunity to build organic connections. Consider leveraging your LinkedIn profile to market yourself by sharing articles you publish or local recognitions and engage with your network to help celebrate their wins. You never know where your colleagues from law school will end up. Treat everyone you interact with as a potential referral source.

Connect with the "Go-getter" and Find Out What is Working for Them

In law school, and in practice, the "go-getter" often gets a bad rap. Nevertheless, consider the fact that the rock star law student or new lawyer has likely identified study tips or work habits that are effective and might also work for you. If you are aware that one of your colleagues is lauded for strong performance, it may be beneficial to reach out to them. During the conversation, acknowledge that you have observed that they are performing well, and you would like to know whether they have any specific study or organizational tips that work for them. The results of this interaction can be twofold: you might discover helpful tips that will improve your study and/or practice skills, and you will continue to grow your professional network.

There is so much more to being a lawyer than understanding the theoretical legal concepts and knowing how to apply them. The successful new lawyer should also develop a mastery of soft skills like networking and being a self-starter. Starting a legal career can be challenging for anyone, but the adept new lawyer will recognize and appreciate each opportunity to learn, connect, grow and develop a successful practice.