

The ABCs of Associate Success

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Learning how to practice law is no easy feat, and navigating the ins and outs of associate expectations in a law firm can be just as challenging. While there is no one-size-fits all formula, here are 26 tips

for associate success listed from A to Z.



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Absorb the facts of your cases. Associates are often tasked with becoming familiar with the facts of their cases, as well as clients' businesses

and industries, before diving into the substantive law involved in a case. An associate who can craft a clear and accurate narrative for the client and partner will be a star.



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Bill better. The reality is that the ability to consistently and accurately track, enter, and finalize your time is one of the most important parts of this

job. Learn how to improve billing entries by reviewing pre-bills and the final bills that are actually sent to the client.

Calendar everything. Use a paper calendar, your phone, your computer, or all of the above to track deadlines, meetings, and other appointments, both personal and work related.

Delegate work where appropriate. If a task is not billable and can be easily delegated to your assistant, do it. It will save valuable time and help develop

Zero in on your goals. If your ultimate goal is to make partner, take the necessary steps to make that possible. If your goal is to start building a client base, network and meet with the experts, i.e., firm rainmakers. If your goal is to simply meet every deadline and produce quality work product, focus on that.

a relationship with some of the most experienced members of the firm.

Engage in the legal community outside of the firm. Oregon is a small legal community. Reputation matters.

Find a mentor. Make efforts to attend bar association and law school alumni events where you can meet someone whose career you admire. Meet with them regularly for coffee or lunch. A number of lawyers in the local community genuinely enjoy connecting with newer attorneys. Taking the time to connect with someone who can sponsor your success and answer your questions is extremely worthwhile.

Gift yourself a weekend or week away a few times a year. Having an event

to look forward to that is not work related can provide valuable motivation during crunch time.

Health is key. Take care of your physical and mental health. The practice of law is a marathon, not a sprint, and your well-being should be a top priority.

Initiate and be proactive. Instead of saying "Do you want me to write an article?" take the extra steps of thinking of a topic and making specific plans for when and where you want to submit the article. Similarly, if you do not have enough work, speak up and let your colleagues and partners know. Taking initiative on cases when work is slow is also a useful practice. There is work to be done on cases at any given time, even if minimal.

Joke around (when and where appropriate). In other words, do not take yourself too seriously. It is important to keep a sense of humor, and most firms will appreciate the effort. Make efforts to connect and socialize with your fellow associates. Other associates can be great resources both in terms of substantive legal questions and in getting a handle on different partners' preferences. Oftentimes, they'll be able to answer questions about what a particular partner expects if it's not immediately clear.

Know your audience. Are you trying to persuade an arbitrator or judge to rule a certain way? Or are you trying to provide an assessment of a case to a client or partner? The tone will vary significantly depending on the reader. Also, make sure

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you are communicating clearly. Remember that when you are sending an email to a client, they are paying for your thoughts, so avoid making them work to try to understand what you are saying. Deliver a thorough and finished product to both partners and clients.

Log your career development. Keep a document on your computer and update it every time you take a deposition, write an article, speak at a conference, or take the lead on drafting a dispositive motion.

Make time for yourself. Law can be all-consuming. A hobby or volunteer effort can renew motivation and provide valuable perspective in your practice. Plus, it can be fun.

Naiveté and inexperience are expected. Take constructive feedback when offered and run with it. It takes time for a partner to review work product and provide constructive feedback and advice. View that as a gift, and be appreciative of the partner's time.

Over-communicate with the partner on the file. Unless or until you are told otherwise from the partner, make sure you copy them on emails to clients or opposing counsel.

Prioritize business development. Business development can take many forms. Drafting articles and speaking at events are obvious options, but also consider getting involved with leadership in a bar organization or a trade industry group that sparks your interest.

Questions are crucial. As a newer attorney, you are not expected to know everything about the law. Do not be afraid to ask questions, but be thoughtful about the question you are asking. If possible, research first. You can then present a pointed, specific question,



rather than an overbroad, helpless “How do I do this?” There is a reason it is called the “practice” of law.

Return phone calls and emails promptly. Responsiveness is a key component to professionalism in general, but it is especially important when it comes to lawyers. Clients will often place responsiveness at the top of their priorities when choosing an attorney, and it is never too early to get into the habit.

Send follow-up reminders. Add a task to your calendar to send a “check-in” email every time you send a document for signature or review to a client or partner that goes unanswered. People appreciate the follow-up.

Triple-check your work product before sending it to a partner or client.

Understand that partners and clients are busy. Partners and clients have numerous other responsibilities in their work lives. Your cases are not the only ones on a partner's docket.

Value clients' and partners' time as much as your own, or more. Wherever possible, be proactive about submitting

drafts to the partner a few days ahead of a deadline to allow time for review.

Witness senior attorneys in depositions, hearings, and client meetings as much as possible. Take advantage of these learning opportunities, even if it means making up the hours at a different time.

[E]Xistential crises are an occupational hazard.

Yield final decisions to the managing attorney on the case. You may disagree with the chosen course of action. While it is important to speak up and let your point of view be heard, the final decision belongs to the partner. Your time will come.

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In sum, remember your ABCs. By following these tips, you can avoid common pitfalls and achieve success as an associate.