



Practical advice for a powerful career in the law

Attorneys Cited

» [Howard J. Berlin](#)

Professionals: [Howard J. Berlin](#)

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As many new lawyers know, there is more to the legal profession than they will find within the boundaries of a law book or the confines of a classroom, or even within the realm of their favorite television legal drama. The fact is, success in the law requires a constant development of skills and knowledge, as well as an understanding of business principles and an attention to the complexity and value of human relationships. As attorneys, the connections we make matter, and the culture of the firm we choose can make all the difference to our success.



And so, to those embarking on a new career in law, I offer a few words of advice, and some insight, based on trial and error - but mostly, of course, trial.

Crazy Like Me

Every law firm has its own culture. A firm's culture is its personality. In many firms, the culture is so distinct that you can feel it the moment you enter the reception area, hear it in how they answer a phone call, read it in their correspondence, view it on their web site and experience it when you deal with their lawyers.

When you join a firm, you enter into a business relationship with all of the people who work there. Business relationships can be as complex as personal relationships. For attorneys, the legal profession is not a 9-5 job. You will spend a lot of time with the people you work with. Inevitably, you will fare better with people you can relate to and who you feel comfortable with. In a recent interview, I asked how the recruit would feel about taking a personality profile exam in connection with interview process. The recruit asked, "Why, do you think I'm crazy?" I answered "No" and said that I knew that we were crazy, and that I wanted to see if the recruit was the same kind of crazy as us.

The Smart Way to Deal with Staff

New or old, only foolish lawyers treat their staff badly. Let me repeat that: new or old, only knuckleheads treat their staff poorly. If you're inclined to bring that "better than you" attitude to your new position, you're probably going to be a loser as a lawyer. Law is a personal service business. It is very difficult to deliver legal services without your personality coming along for the ride. If you behave badly, it will be difficult to cultivate any measurable client following. The services we provide require an inspired effort from all those involved - from the senior most partner to the most junior staff person. If you treat your staff poorly, you can be sure they will have no loyalty to your work, and their unhappiness will be translated to the client service they perform. Legal staff can be a new lawyer's best friend. Treat them with respect

Is This the Best that You Can Do?

One of the bad habits that some law

students carry along into the practice of law is the "habit" of waiting until the last minute to complete an assignment. There are many distractions in life as well as business, and without self-imposed discipline, it's easy to find oneself on the tail end of a deadline without a final product. When you're in school, the only person you're going to impact from a tardy response is yourself. When you become a lawyer, the paradigm changes. You are no longer working for yourself. Instead, you are working for real clients with real issues and problems. When you short-change the process of delivering a good work product, you are directly impacting another human being. The new rule should be: only hand in an assignment if you believe it's the best that you can do under the circumstances. Don't rely on your supervising partner to catch all of your mistakes.

Judicial Assistants and Other Court Personnel

Judicial Assistants (JA's) are an extension of the Judge. Treat and communicate with them as you would the Judge. If you act badly when you deal with them, you can be sure that it will be passed along to the Judge. JA's are part of the Court Room process. Treat them with the respect that they deserve.

Avoid Elevator Talk

You hear it all the time: two or more lawyers riding in an elevator and talking about their case. As a rule, you should never discuss a client matter in any public forum where third parties can overhear the conversation. Aside from our ethical duty to preserve client confidences, you run the risk of exposing sensitive aspects of your

client's case to people who you don't know.

Negotiate Your Own Client

A fatal mistake made by many new lawyers is to take what their clients tell them "at face value" and to advocate the position without question. The human psyche is a complicated thing. There can be many reasons why your client may not tell you everything there is to tell, and even when they do, they often share the facts and circumstances only from their perspective. Presume that there is more to the story. Presume that the other side has some legitimacy to their position. The more time you spend examining your client's position with them, while exploring alternatives, the more likely you will be able to succeed in crafting a viable solution that addresses interests on all sides of the problem.

Networking

It's never too early to start networking, as the business of law is based on personal relationships. Make a point to get out of the office. Get involved in civic organizations. Get involved with the Bar. The most valuable asset that you will ever acquire in your legal career is your reputation. While reputations can be earned one case at a time, they can also be acquired by becoming recognized for the efforts you put into your activities outside the office.

Become a Student of the Economics of the Practice of Law:

The practice of law is both a profession and a business. Most of the time that you spend in law school is devoted to the profession as well as the substantive elements of the law. However, after graduation, you will see

first-hand that there are economic issues that overlay the practice and can have a substantial impact on the professional service side. Dollars and economics permeate almost every aspect of the practice.

There is of course an endless supply of advice that you will receive on your journey into the profession. Hopefully, you will work hard to separate the good from the bad, and to be critical in your judgment, but open-minded in your review of the facts.

I'll close with two thoughts. First, learn to be succinct. You're not being paid by the word. Second, take every opportunity to go to court and observe. You'll learn more than you can imagine from the experience. And learning, of course, is the foundation of a successful career.

The Miami Center
201 South Biscayne Blvd
Seventeenth Floor
Miami, Florida 33131
(305) 379-9000

Peninsula Executive Center
2385 N.W. Executive Center Dr.,
Suite 300
Boca Raton, Florida 33431
(561) 443-0800