

What They Didn't Teach in Law School

By Andrea Lee Negroni

Since I graduated from law school in 1982, the legal world has changed, and so have the tools used by most lawyers in their practices. Typewriters have given way to computers, linen bond letterhead to e-mail, and daytime work hours to 24/7 availability via BlackBerry and other handheld devices. Law firms have half as many books and 10 times as much technology.

Washington, D.C., office space costs two or three times as much, but a lawyer's working wardrobe costs less than half as much. Lawyers are expected to bill more hours than before, and the path to partnership is longer. Law firms are more diverse, female and minority lawyers no longer are rare, and opportunities are greater to create an interesting niche practice.

Throughout my career in small, medium, and large firms, as an associate, partner, and now Of Counsel, I have seen many summer associates and new classes of associates arrive, slightly uneasy about the firm's expectations. Most of these uncertainties are addressed through training programs, in-house and outside conferences, and mentoring programs. Other issues, often more personal, typically are not part of these training programs, but they have an impact on the way lawyers are viewed by both their colleagues and clients.

I have known hundreds of lawyers in law firms of all sizes, and I recognize that many of the most successful—of all ages and from all backgrounds—have in common certain behavioral traits. Usually, these traits usually are not developed in law school. It is often these so-called “soft skills” that set a lawyer apart from his or her peers, even in an environment of intellectual and legal excellence.

On the back end of my own legal career, I wish to speak from the heart about what they don't teach in law school because these areas matter a great deal in private practice. I hope you can find something helpful in the advice below.

1. *Soft Skills Matter*. Soft skills range from good phone manners to maintaining a professional appearance and not being grouchy in the office. There is truth to the old saying "there's never a second chance to make a first impression."

When you arrive in the office, greet the receptionist (and learn his or her name). When you go out for a cup of coffee, ask your neighbor if you can bring him or her one. Do not leave dirty plates and cups in the kitchen sink. Do not help yourself to other people's food in the common refrigerator. Pick up a lunch tab occasionally. Knock before entering someone's office. These are simple acts that make a good impression.

2. *Know Your Colleagues*. Law firms are no place for timidity. Introduce yourself to your coworkers; do not simply rely on the introduction memo or announcement that was circulated when you joined the firm. If that memo hit someone's mailbox when they were in a meeting or juggling phone calls, it was probably overlooked or forgotten. If you are a new graduate, introduce yourself meaningfully, with both first and last name, and perhaps a brief reminder of when you joined the firm and what you do. In the long run, you need your colleagues and coworkers to know who you are.

Networking studies indicate it can take eight to 12 contact occasions before a person makes enough of an impression on a stranger to be remembered. In a law firm, it may not be that many, but there is no harm in volunteering your name more than once. You would not be faulted

for reminding people who you are, and if they have forgotten, you have done them a favor by preventing an awkward exchange.

Senior lawyers are more likely to ask for help from lawyers they know than to seek out associates they have not met or cannot remember.

3. *Leave Clear Messages.* The phone is a primary tool in the legal profession. Even in an era dominated by e-mail and the Internet, clients and colleagues still want to hear your voice. When leaving a message, speak clearly, repeat your first and last name and your firm affiliation, and if appropriate, spell your name. I always repeat my number twice because I do not know if the person I called has a pen to take it down when they first play back my message.

4. *Use Professional Cards Liberally.* Stationers say that with one exception, paper supply sales to the business community are falling off a cliff. The exception is cards: business cards, personal cards, and professional cards. Your professional cards are a back-up method of self-introduction. Never leave home without them. You have earned them, so use them.

If you speak more than one language, ask your firm to print both sides of the card, with one side in English, and the other in your additional language.

5. *Study the Leadership.* The business of introducing yourself is more or less a one-way street for new associates. The more senior lawyers and clients won't necessarily introduce themselves to their junior counterparts. It is the associate's job to know the firm's leaders. The firm Web site is your go-to tool for this task. Every partner expects (even if he or she does not say so) that all associates know who they are and what they do.

6. *Use Honorifics.* Respect and courtesy rule. Relationships tend to fall into informality over time, but in a professional setting, it is best to start out more formally. This is doubly true if you are young and your client or coworker is older or more senior. Remember to address a client you do not know personally as “Mr.” or “Ms.” instead of “Jack” or “Joan.” Clients sometimes want to be reminded in small ways that they are held in high regard.

7. *Suppress the Electronics.* There is a generational divide between younger and older lawyers’ reliance on and use of electronics such as cell phones and other handheld devices. Attorneys who graduated when I did started using handheld devices and texting about the time we became partners, while some lawyers have been texting forever.

Do not text, check your BlackBerry, or take phone calls in meetings, while talking to your superiors, or at other inappropriate moments. Surreptitious texting is just as bad, or maybe even worse. It sends the message to others that they do not have your full attention. Where clients are concerned, when they are paying hundreds of dollars an hour for your attention, they want *all* of it.

Exceptions exist. When your child is in the hospital, you can excuse yourself from a meeting, with a brief explanation, if you have to take a call. When you are in someone else’s office and they have an essential call or a personal one, indicate with a nod of your head toward the door an offer to excuse yourself until they are finished.

8. *Ask If It's Convenient.* Respect for other people's time requires you to find out if someone has time to talk *before* you launch into a conversation. Sometimes, the difference between a "yes" and "no" answer is in the timing of the question.

If I have something substantive to say, I ask the other person if they have time to talk. Your message, whatever it is, will be better received if the person on the receiving end has time to hear you. No one is sitting around doing nothing while waiting to hear from you. You are almost always interrupting something, so ask if it is a good time.

9. *Be on Time.* Law firms usually bill clients in intervals of an hour. Time is money. When a five-lawyer meeting is scheduled for noon, one person's 10-minute delay in arriving translates to 50 minutes of lost time. Punctuality also applies to phone calls, especially multiparty conference calls. When there is a call-in time, call in at that time, or even a minute or two before. Do not be the lawyer known for keeping others waiting.

10. *Be an Ambassador.* Every lawyer is a diplomat for his or her employer. "Smith and Jones" is merely a name to most people, but the individual lawyers of Smith and Jones create the public impression.

Despite some public opinion polls indicating lawyers are held in low regard, I believe the opposite is true and that most people greatly admire and respect lawyers. How do I know this? By gauging reactions to many years of answering the question "what do you do?" People generally are impressed by the profession, and every lawyer plays a part in reinforcing that positive notion.

11. *Appearances Count.* Most law firms and corporations are more casual in 2010 than they were in 1982 when a closetful of suits was mandatory for both male and female lawyers. I cannot speak for other jurisdictions, but in Washington, casual dress has a specific meaning in professional offices. It means you can lose the necktie on Fridays, but it does not mean you can wear flip-flops, jeans, shorts, sneakers, or T-shirts. Do not listen to anyone who tells you otherwise (unless it is the senior partner of your firm).

Lawyers need a good working wardrobe and a reliable dry cleaner. They also need to make regular trips to the barber or hairdresser and maintain excellent grooming. Keep a comb, mouthwash, and dental floss in your desk. Keep a spare jacket on the back of your door. Keep an umbrella in your office.

Washington lawyers are not known for their fashion sense, so a little style goes a long way. Study the wardrobes of the successful lawyers in Washington and the prominent members of your law firm. Dress for where you are headed, not where you have been.

12. *Track of Your Achievements.* Many associates are asked to self-evaluate at year-end, and despite long hours, it can be difficult to remember everything you did for your firm and your clients. Set aside 10–15 minutes a week (or a month) to summarize your achievements. Keep a list as a reminder of your accomplishments. This list will give you a ready answer when others ask what you have been up to. You should be ready to justify your existence at a moment's notice.

13. *Tidy Up.* People make judgments about lawyers based on their offices. Not everyone has a showplace office, but stacks of papers on the floor, windowsill, and chairs do not send a message

that a lawyer is highly organized. Empty coffee cups and soda cans, gym clothes, and other debris show a lack of respect for the space for which your law firm is paying \$50 or more per square foot.

The firm also has made a big investment in office furniture and accessories. Binder clips dragged across the surface of wood tables and desks can leave damage. Uncapped pens and markers can leave ink stains on upholstered furniture and carpets. Respect the premises.

14. *Attitude Is Everything.* In every firm, there are people others want to be around and people they avoid. It is all about attitude. You can choose to be positive or negative at work; people recognize the difference. They say one can hear a smile through a phone line, and I believe that is true.

An example from my own experience: Ten years ago, as a partner in a large firm, I worked frequently with a fifth-year associate. When I asked him if he was available, regardless of the assignment, he invariably said “I’d love to work on that.” His enthusiastic response always took me by surprise because some assignments were not glamorous. I kept this lawyer on my must-call list because he genuinely seemed eager to work on whatever came up. He was always busy (because mine were not the only assignments to which he *loved* to contribute) and had lots of billable hours, even when other associates did not.

15. *Multitasking Is Mandatory.* I do not know any successful private practitioners who work on only one matter at a time. Juggling assignments, clients, and projects is a skill that must be mastered because every client needs to believe that when they call, you are 100 percent focused on their issues.

There are a few ways to make multitasking easier. The first is to manage client expectations. For new associates, the senior associates and partners may be your first “clients,” and these tips work with them, too.

The first step in managing client expectations is to make sure you know what is required and when. Meeting deadlines is essential. Do what you promise to do. When promised deadlines turn out to be impossible, *bona fide* emergencies should be explained as early as possible so that clients can make other arrangements. But do not just declare an emergency and beg off. Try and find someone else to finish up for you. This will be much easier to do if you reciprocate when others need you as a backstop.

16. *Respect the Staff.* Associates sometimes fail to appreciate that nonlegal staff members form opinions about them, too, and those opinions matter to management. A lawyer whose time sheets are always late, who does not follow rules for expense reports or credit card use, or who lets a mandatory bar membership lapse wastes the time of the staffer who has to fix the problem. That lawyer is eventually thought of as “high maintenance,” which is not a good reputation to have.

17. *You’re on the Team.* Lawyers can and should help each other, but sometimes real life intervenes in professional life, and partners know this. That is why lawyers need a Plan B. The relationships you have built in the firm should enable you to call on others for help when needed. Obviously, this is a reciprocal undertaking. Remember, it is important to play well with others.

18. *Read the Paper/Watch the News.* I work in a business-oriented law firm, and the subject matter of our practice is finance. Unless you have been to business school or studied economics,

finance is not particularly intuitive. However, understanding your client's business is key to providing sound and relevant legal advice. Make it a habit to read the *Wall Street Journal* and other newspapers and magazines. Just as important, an appreciation of your client's business makes the legal work more satisfying.

19. *Know Your Clients.* The more you know about your clients, the better positioned you are to advise them. If your clients are public companies, read their annual reports, visit their Web sites, and read industry publications in their fields. You can use services such as LexisNexis to keep up with specific companies, or use online brokerage company "alerts" to get e-mail notices of developments affecting public companies.

Make it your business to know who the client's officers are, what the client's revenues are, when it has new products, whether its business is national or international, and so forth. The more you know about your clients, the more you will care about their legal issues and the more mentally invested in their success you will become.

20. *Initiate Contact.* Relationships involving attorneys and clients are a two-way street. Clients often want their lawyers to bring important, relevant developments to their attention, and not just to respond to incoming requests. Most clients like proactive, not reactive, counsel.

21. *Stay in Touch.* Keep in contact with your clients, even if their files are dormant. A simple monthly or quarterly phone call may be enough to keep you "top of mind" to your clients. There is truth to the saying, "out of sight, out of mind," especially in relationships where communications are billed in one-tenth-hour increments (and, no, you cannot charge your clients

for stay-in-touch calls). If you are not calling your clients regularly, you can be sure that some other lawyer is.

Continuous dialogue with clients may yield unexpected benefits. Not every phone call produces legal work, but more often than you would guess, regular client contact leads to more work. When I was building my practice, I usually touched base with my in-house counsel clients toward the end of the workweek. Sometimes during these calls, a corporate lawyer agonized about working all weekend to meet a Monday deadline. When I volunteered my own weekend, I often hung up with a new assignment.

Associates may be years away from attracting clients, but it is never too early to start developing the networks that eventually make it easier to meet potential clients. There are limitless ways to do this, but some of the old strategies are tried-and-true.

22. *Network.* Join at least one voluntary legal organization, and another that is philanthropic, sports-oriented, or civic in nature. People hire lawyers they know or those they have heard about.

The sophisticated business community does not use Craigslist to find counsel. Lawyers who expect to build a private practice have to be in the same circles as those who need legal services. These circles are everywhere, from your law school alumni association to the local chamber of commerce, pet rescue group, or community theatre.

However, just having your name on a membership roster is not enough. To build a network, you must become involved in the group and get to know the other members. You have to actually attend the meetings, volunteer for the committees, and contribute to the organization's work.

If the organization is a good fit for you, you will make friends as well as potentially useful contacts. If the first group you join does not turn out to be a good fit, try another; keep trying until you find your niche. More senior lawyers can introduce you to potential organizations to join and can help introduce you to the members.

A lawyer cannot predict in advance where clients ultimately will come from, or how colleagues and competitors will enrich his or her professional life. However, lawyers can be visible and useful within the communities that interest them.

23. *Read Nonverbal Cues.* Not everything you need to know is in black and white, but much useful information is hiding in plain sight. Here are a few examples:

- A client's complaints about overwork may be an opportunity to pitch for new assignments. Volunteer to relieve some of the load. A client or colleague's vacation or medical leave is an opportunity for a lawyer to offer to step in and fill a need.
- A tired-looking partner or senior associate is a good prospect for an assignment and for relationship-building, especially if you find him or her in the office toiling away after hours, weekends, and holidays.
- An e-mail from a colleague asking if someone has experience with a particular subject can be a veiled invitation for help with that matter.

- A solicitation for a client or coworker's good cause reveals their involvements. Be open to responding to these solicitations; even small contributions to someone else's charitable or philanthropic efforts are appreciated.
- Office events such as happy hours, holiday parties, and sports events are team-building opportunities. Attend them.

24. *Know the Competition.* Meet your competitors at other law firms. Very few lawyers retire from the first firm they join. The more lawyers you know, the greater your options, including opportunities at other firms. Firms often ask their own lawyers to refer candidates for new hires.

If you are conflicted out of representing a client, knowing your competitors puts you in the position of making qualified referrals. Those who make referrals, get referrals.

25. *Nurture Others.* In the course of a legal career many people, other than clients, can help and recommend you. For example, I have given many speeches, and I always seek out the conference coordinator to thank him or her for the invitation. Legal conference coordinators usually are lawyers themselves, and if they remember you, they will keep you in mind for future speaking opportunities.

If you are asked to speak or write an article or serve on a committee and you cannot do it, suggest someone who can. Editors appreciate this. Your next article placement will be easier to achieve.

If someone you meet in a legal or business group passes along a worthwhile résumé, put out some feelers to assist the jobseeker. These efforts will reinforce your network and eventually make your own overtures to others well-received. Nurturing others also feels surprisingly good.

If you have read this far, stay with me for one final thought: Despite the long hours, difficult or repetitive assignments, work-life balance problems, and other sometimes unglamorous aspects of law firm life, it is a rare privilege to be a trusted advisor to others.

What they do not—and likely cannot—teach in law school is how rewarding a legal career can be if you embrace this privilege and approach your career with the highest level of professionalism you can muster.

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