

# Expert Q&A on Career Advancement and Professional Development

## PRACTICAL LAW EMPLOYEE BENEFITS & EXECUTIVE COMPENSATION

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**A Q&A with law firm partners, former partners, in-house counsel, and members of the Practical Law editorial team on practical advice for career advancement and professional development. This Q&A is intended for junior attorneys.**

Practical Law asked several senior lawyers to answer questions designed to elicit practical advice for junior lawyers on setting themselves up for career advancement. Themes that emerged included:

- Networking and finding mentors are essential. Everyone needs a network of trusted contacts and mentors who can provide perspective that can be difficult to find in your early career.
- Strive to anticipate the needs of the people you work for and go above and beyond to make them look good.
- Be responsive. Always acknowledge emails and confirm that you are working on assignments. Provide status reports.
- When tackling assignments, analyze the issues thoroughly and thoughtfully and try to propose solutions. Do not turn in work product that parrots the rules or regulations or is otherwise in draft form, expecting others to provide the hard answers. Try to address the practical implications of the matter.
- Make sure you care about the job and appreciate what the trappings are before you take it on. Finding balance between work and your personal life is difficult and requires creative scheduling. The balance does not look the same for everyone and may never be perfect, but find a standard that works for you.

Below are the questions asked and answers given by our experts.

**Is there any advice that you wish someone had given to you when you entered the legal profession that you can offer to those starting out today?**

*Regina Olshan, Partner, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP*

Keep in touch with people – colleagues who leave the firm, law school classmates, lawyers on the other side of transactions who you became

friendly with, and junior members of the client's in-house team. Even those who don't think of themselves as natural "networkers" can build up a network of trusted contacts over time in this way.

*Robb W. Patryk, Partner, Hughes Hubbard & Reed LLP*

Maintain contacts and friendships despite your professional commitments as a lawyer. It is essential to business development in the future, and wholly apart from that a better way to live and enjoy your life.

Step away from your assignments and get perspective on the big picture, to gain an understanding of how your work fits with the overall strategic plan for the case and its thematic development.

Grab ahold of your own career in the early stages to seek out professional development opportunities rather than relying solely on in-firm training or otherwise waiting for opportunities to come to you.

*Austin K. So, General Counsel, Chief Legal Officer & Secretary, StoneMor Partners L.P.*

You learn very little about the practice of law and the profession of law in law school, which means that you will need to learn on the job. That takes years and leads to uninformed decisions at critical junctures. I wish I'd known the importance of networking and finding mentors who could give me guidance and perspective that took years for me to develop.

*Nancy Hawkins, Vice President of Editorial, Practical Law/Thomson Reuters (former Partner, Greenberg Traurig, LLP)*

Rather than asking someone to find a mentor for you, find one yourself. Make yourself invaluable to the senior associates and partners you work with so they will want to mentor you. It can be a win-win. They take you under their wing and teach you the ropes with respect to both substantive matters and client development. You make their lives easier. Without a mentor or champion to help you navigate the waters, working in a law firm can be excessively challenging.

Also, make it a priority to understand the business of law, including what clients will pay for, discounting and realization rates. The more you understand about how a law firm makes profits, the more valuable you will be as an attorney and business person.

### **Do the people who rise to the top in the legal profession share certain characteristics?**

*Austin So*

Drive and ambition. Keep at it, and you will get there.

My best outside counsel know what I need to know. I want to know in real time if there are important developments on important matters. I don't want to be caught flat-footed when I get asked a question by the CEO or board member. I need to know before they know.

### **How can junior lawyers make themselves indispensable to the partners or other people they work for?**

*Andrew L. Oringer, Partner, Dechert LLP*

I think that caring about the project and going above and beyond, so that nuances and details are not left unattended, can be a significant part of indispensability. Think about if you were the partner. What would you want the associate to be doing for you? What would impress you most about the associate's efforts? Do those things. But, before that road is taken, you really first need to care.

*Alvin H. Brown, Retired Partner, Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP*

Anticipate what will be needed and get it done. The thing a partner loves to hear is, "I thought you'd need this, so I did it." This may be difficult when you are starting out, because you may not know enough to know what is needed. Initially, you may need to ask other people what you can do. But always be proactive about seeking ways to contribute and add value.

*Regina Olshan*

Do not bring problems to a partner without having independently thought about and researched the issue and without one or more proposed solutions. Junior lawyers bring value when they think through and analyze issues and documents, not when they expect their senior colleagues to do all the thinking and provide every answer.

*Jessica Cherry, Senior Legal Editor, Practical Law/Thomson Reuters (former Partner, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP)*

Take pride in your work. Never turn in sloppy work product or work that you do not fully understand or could not explain. Before you turn in work product to a partner, ask yourself whether you have done everything you would do if the work product were being sent directly to the client and you were required to answer their questions about it. If it is not at that point, keep working. A partner wants to feel confident that if he or she gives you an assignment, you will provide clear, thoughtful work product that identifies and analyzes the issues and saves the partner time. If you provide a sloppy draft that the partner must fix, he or she will find someone else next time.

Also, be responsive. When you receive an email, acknowledge it. If the email is an assignment, let the partner know you are working on it. If the email is a request for volunteers, either volunteer or state what prevents you from doing so. Try to anticipate the partner's needs. Always assume that the partner you are working for is busier than you are and act accordingly.

*Lily J. Lu, Vice President, Deputy General Counsel and Chief Corporate and Securities Counsel, IDEXX Laboratories, Inc.*

What is key is to make the people you work for look good to their clients and peers.

### **What are the biggest mistakes you see lawyers making at the beginning of their careers?**

*Lily Lu*

The biggest mistake you can make at the very beginning of your career is to say "no" to new opportunities, experiences and challenges and to conceive of your job as simply doing what somebody tells you to do. Every assignment and experience is a learning opportunity and a chance to show leaders and your peers how you are contributing to the organization's success. Plus, if you look at your job as simply taking instruction, you will miss out on becoming a thought partner for the people who you work for. When you are a thought partner, you get to actually do the interesting stuff and learn a lot more, and your boss will value your contributions more.

*Robb Patryk*

The most common mistakes I see are:

- Failing to acknowledge email, especially when assignments are given that way.
- Failing to give status reports on assignments without having to be asked.
- Failing to take the time to edit the draft one more time to ensure absolute clarity.

Our stock in trade is communication, and any failure to communicate clearly and accurately risks our not winning the matter before us or being hired for the next one.

*Alvin Brown*

Being unwilling to admit they don't know every answer and asking for help. It is hard to say "I don't know what you want" or "I don't understand the question." But asking those things, getting clarification, shows maturity and avoids wasted effort and mistakes. It is better to ask for clarification on an issue several times, perhaps in different ways, than to leave the office or hang up the phone unclear of what is expected.

### **What should lawyers do at the outset of the attorney-client relationship to gain their client's confidence? In addition to providing good legal advice, what should lawyers do to maintain positive client relationships?**

*Andrew Oringer*

I think that not overplaying one's level of knowledge and expertise is critical. If you come across as ahead of your years, and then can't back it up, you stand to lose credibility. Also, try to be friendly and personable, outside of the four corners of the substance under review. People like to like the people with whom they are talking. But do not be too light-hearted - one does not want to be perceived as frivolous.

*Sharon H. Makower, Senior Legal Editor, Practical Law/Thomson Reuters (former Associate General Counsel, Cablevision Systems Corporation)*

Be honest and up front with the client. Do not over-promise and under-deliver. Don't just tell the client what you think he or she

wants to hear. Don't be afraid to say, "no, that can't be done," but follow with an explanation of why and suggestions on another way to accomplish the client's goals. Above all, be responsive. If a client calls or emails, don't ignore him or her while you search for an answer. Let the client know that you are working on it. If it takes some time, send status updates.

**Today there are different methods of communicating with clients and no one method works in every situation. Can you share any strategies for ensuring effective communications with clients?**

*Regina Olshan*

All methods of communication have their place and can be useful. I do think at times email is too easy, that is, it is too easy to send off an email response to a discrete question not realizing that you don't have all of the facts about the situation that may have made a difference in your answer or otherwise colored your response, and a short email can easily be forwarded without appropriate context. Sometimes it is useful to just pick up the phone.

*Jessica Cherry*

I think it is important to follow your client's lead. If they call you, they probably expect a phone call back. I think junior lawyers often shy away from the phone because they are afraid they will get asked a question they can't answer. But there is nothing wrong with saying that you need to think about an issue or do some research and get back to them. Clients can readily perceive when you lack subject matter expertise. They will generally understand you needing to get back to them but will never forget you providing bad advice.

Email is also a great way to communicate. But it is important to proofread before hitting send, especially the recipient line.

**In addition to training offered by a law firm or legal department, what kinds of things should lawyers do to advance their own careers?**

*Austin So*

Lawyers need to speak on a variety of subjects at any given time, so having a broad perspective on business and the economy are critical.

Being current on the latest business news is a given. Networking across the spectrum of various businesses and lawyers at different stages of their careers is a must.

*Robb Patryk*

Associates should seek out pro bono cases that offer the opportunity to use or develop certain skill sets, for example, in the litigation context, a trial or hearing with live witnesses. They should also be unabashed in approaching partners with whom they want to work.

**Because of the significant demands on lawyers' time and the stress inherent in the job, many lawyers find it difficult to maintain a satisfying life outside of work. Can you share any tips for maintaining a healthy balance?**

*Regina Olshan*

Know how to say no in both areas of your life – personal and professional. Take your vacations. Take your parental leaves. Become as efficient as possible and figure out a schedule that works and that guarantees some family time, even if it is early mornings rather than bedtimes. Don't get discouraged or believe you need to live up to some particular cultural standard of what a good mother or good father is. Make your own standard that works for you and your family.

*Jessica Cherry*

There is no easy answer to this question. Being a lawyer is hard work and the work flow is often unpredictable. You will miss events you want to attend and you may have to work over a holiday weekend. But it is imperative that you have a life apart from your job. I get up very early in the morning to do things that I would not otherwise be able to do. That works for me, but it may not work for others. Be creative with your scheduling and find what works for you.

*Lily Lu*

Do you have any tips for me? All kidding aside, this is one of the biggest challenges for all lawyers. Pick at least one thing that you care about and schedule it. Literally, schedule it and make it a habit. I find that if I don't schedule it, I won't do it.

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