First-Year Lawyers: 30 Tips in 30 Minutes
Orienting to a New Firm/Office

1. Finding a Mentor
   Whether from inside or outside your firm, a more senior person who takes an interest in your career can provide you with knowledge, insight, and guidance. Many firms have a formal mentoring program set up for new associates. If yours does, take advantage of it, because having a mentor is one key to finding success in the practice of law. If not, observe which attorneys you naturally gravitate toward. You also can seek out a bar association colleague or an alumnum of your law school. Even a mentoring relationship via email can be advantageous.

2. Receiving Software Training
   Your firm uses a variety of software systems to control documents, input time, track deadlines, etc. Learn each of the systems so that you can be efficient and productive. Working closely with the person responsible for technology training will pay off in more ways than just learning the systems. Often the trainers are better and faster at responding to problems than a help desk person.

3. Learning the Law
   In your first year as an associate, learn as much as you can. Take on as wide a variety of assignments as possible. The more work you do, the easier it will be to determine what aspects of the law you enjoy. And, the more people you work with in the firm as you begin, the better oriented you will be to the range of styles and practice approaches.

4. Understanding Online Research Economics
   You no longer have unlimited, free access to popular online legal research systems. Remember to inquire about the specific pricing structure your firm contracts for with vendors, as the agreed-upon pricing may vary. Contact your administrator or the firm's provider representative to get a full understanding of how and for what the firm will be charged before you go online.

5. Accepting Assignments
   Listen to the assignment, take notes, and ask questions. Asking questions is a way to learn and demonstrate interest. You will want to get the assignment right, rather than let the client and the assigning attorney down by handing in the wrong work.

6. Knowing Who Does What
   Become very familiar with the structure of the administrative side of the firm. By knowing who does what, you decrease time spent waiting to get tasks accomplished. If you can identify key people, and make strong professional relationships with them, you will receive, and in turn provide, better service.
Gaining Time Estimates

Inquire as to the estimate of hours to be spent on the assignment. Talk to the assigning attorney immediately if your initial research poses any doubt about completing the assignment within the estimated time frame.

Knowing Your Firm

Become familiar with all the practice areas and offices of your firm. Know enough about each so that you can talk to a potential client about the breadth and depth of services the firm offers. All this information should be available on a web page, firm brochure, or through the marketing department.

Interacting With Colleagues

Incorporating Assigning Attorneys’ Styles

Chances are, the partners and senior associates for whom you work will have varying writing styles, and thus may hold different expectations for your work. Try to adapt to the differences rather than becoming confused or frustrated. It is a worthwhile challenge to satisfy a variety of bosses.

Devising Performance Expectations

Manage the people you work with as you would any team. Every person plays a part in the success of your practice, from the copy services person to the secretary and the paralegal. When you work with others in a business environment, you all need to be on the same page. Discuss openly the expectations of each person’s contribution to the project or case. Be sure all team members understand their role.

Delegating

As a new attorney, you may have little need to delegate substantive work to another attorney, but you will delegate work to secretaries, paralegals, and other staff. When delegating, be sure to tell the person all the information they will need, give them parameters, timeframe, and ask for follow up.

Making Mistakes

No one expects you to know everything. Be sure to ask for help and learn as much as you can from others’ mistakes and examples. If you do make a mistake, let your supervising attorney know immediately. The more you try to correct a problem, the worse it might become. Most likely, after you feel the terror, he or she will admit having been in the same or a similar situation.
Administrative Matters

13 Reporting All Time
Record and report all of your time, even if you think you spent too much of it on one project. It is the billing attorney's responsibility to make decisions about write-offs or reductions of time billed.

14 Utilizing a Calendaring System
You can keep an appointment book with you, but keeping others up-to-date on your schedule might be best accomplished through a computerized system. Most systems include "to-do lists" and "tasks." These features will help keep you organized. A built-in "tickler system" will remind you of important meetings. Learn what tools your firm has or find one that works for you and those with whom you work most closely.

15 Reading Time Reports
Read timekeeper reports. Ask for them if you do not automatically get them. Review your own time and talk to a partner if you question whether or not you spent too much time on something. Your mentor also can help advise you about your learning curve.

16 Organizing Case Files
Case files need to be organized. If your firm does not have a pre-set system, create your own that you and your team can use with ease. File numbers, cross-references, and color codes can help in the retrieval of documents. Data sheets for each case or matter can put important information at your fingertips.

17 Understanding Billing, Collection, and Costs
Be knowledgeable about your firm's billing and collection practices. Familiarize yourself with firm policies on reimbursable costs charged to clients (e.g. for copying, legal research, etc.), and the way costs, such as for travel, are defined.

18 Creating a Form File
If your firm does not already have a computerized or manual form file, create your own. Form files are samples or copies of previous work that you will most likely be re-using within your first years of practice. You will become more efficient and more productive if you have data at the ready. Train your staff to complete routine or frequently used forms, when possible.

19 Understanding Trust Account Requirements
Understand the trust account requirements for your state. A trust account is a special account in which client monies are held until used to pay a third party or are paid out at the conclusion of a deal. Even a simple accounting error can become a complex problem. Also, know the procedures for deposits and withdrawals from a trust account – and abide by them. And remember: even if a non-lawyer handles the account, the lawyer is ultimately responsible.
Client Relationships

Listening to Your Clients
You will learn how to better serve clients if you understand their overall philosophy and goals. Invite your clients to talk about their industries, their companies, and their interests. Listen to what they have to say.

Recognizing Your Internal Clients
Do not be lulled into thinking the only clients you have are those who pay the firm. In fact, your primary clients as a new attorney are the partners and more senior associates you serve and assist. Responsiveness and eagerness are attributes these clients want and deserve from you, as well.

Creating an Action Plan
No matter what year lawyer you are, you can create an action plan with measurable goals. A goal should be specific, realistic, and capable of completion within an identifiable time frame. For example, an initial goal could be: by the end of this month I will call five current clients to discuss the changes in the XYZ rules related to their businesses.

Building Client Relationships
Eighty percent of all new business comes from current clients. It is easier and more cost effective for firms to focus on client retention and referrals than rely on new client acquisition. So, be sure to enhance your attorney-client relationships by being personable and responsive. Meet deadlines, be accessible, give status reports, and ask for feedback on work performed.

Client Relationships

Joining Bar Associations
Membership in a local, state, national, or specialty bar association generally requires an annual fee, and sometimes membership is mandatory. Ask what membership(s) are covered by the firm, and what the procedure is to apply for reimbursement. If you have multiple practice areas, the firm might only pay for your involvement on a committee relating to your primary area of practice. If so, pay any additional dues yourself, as it is a wise investment in your knowledge base and professional network.

Getting Active in the Community
Become involved in organizations that mean something to you. Teach at a local university or community college. Volunteer your legal services and accept all opportunities to speak to organizations from student to civic groups. Even as a new lawyer, these activities will give you exposure and offer you opportunities to begin building a network of contacts. The busier people are, the better they seem to manage their time, so being active and having outside commitments also will help you stay on task at work.
Considering a Niche

One path to partnership is being a superb lawyer. Another route is finding what you enjoy and becoming an expert in that area of law. Look toward substantive areas, types of clients, or industries to excel in that are new or emerging. Then, become known in your area of expertise by writing and speaking on the topic and by being active in trade, professional, and industry associations. Through this exposure, you will begin to develop a positive reputation in your area of concentration.

Networking Inside the Firm

Sometimes new associates only get to work with one or two assigning partners. If you can, seek assignments from senior associates and a variety of partners, including lawyers in other relevant departments, and even other offices of the firm. The more people who know you and the quality of your work, the more opportunities you will have to develop and progress, and assist with client retention.

Marketing Yourself with Your Resume

Your resume and biography are marketing tools. Ask the marketing department to help you create them so they will catch clients' and partners' attention. Your firm will probably keep resumes and/or bios on file or on a web page. Read and update yours on a consistent basis to add new skills and practice expertise.

Time

Being on Time

When you are attending meetings, be sure to arrive promptly, even if others do not. This is an important practice to adopt from the beginning of your career. Always bring work or reading materials with you, so you can use your time well while waiting for others. Even when you are called to an attorney's office to take an assignment, be prompt and bring something to do, in the event his/her phone rings and you have to wait to complete the process.

Mastering Time Management

Devise a daily routine and, as often as possible, stick to it. Avoid procrastination and learn to control your time so that you can work efficiently. If you need additional assistance organizing your time, there are many time management programs available for purchase, and it is worth the effort to find one that works for you. Plan for both professional and personal time, so you can maintain that all-important balance now and throughout your career.
Leave a Good Tip Winner Tips

31. Be Humble

Think first and then ask for advice - you will be surprised how many people are willing to assist you. Stop talking and listen to the advice you are given.

*Colleen Lamarre, Phillips Lytle LLP, Buffalo, NY*

32. Be a Keen Observer

Be an active learner. Do ask questions. Review your work. Lastly, build genuine, meaningful relationships with both peers and seniors.

*La-Donna Lawrence, Bronx District's Attorney's Office, Bronx, NY*

33. Stay Hungry

Do not resign yourself to a feeling of acquiescence. Ask for challenging assignments, take risks, be prepared to make mistakes, and continually strive to improve yourself while making yourself invaluable to the team.

*Lauren Marsicano, Law Offices of Alan C. Gold, P.A., Coral Gables, FL*

34. Develop Your Brand

Develop your signature brand. This is a process of discovering your strengths, building your expertise and marketing your talent. Remember, your signature brand is as unique as your DNA.

*Artika Tyner, University of St. Thomas, College of Education, Leadership, and Counseling, Minneapolis, MN*

35. Stay Ever Grateful

Stay ever grateful - for life and for the opportunity to practice law. Remember, not everyone gets into law school. Not everyone passes the bar(s). Be confident, but humble and kind. Remember that is called the practice, and let the word 'practice' liberate the heck out of you. Go forth boldly. You won't die. Speak up. Stand tall. Consciously create a network (even small) of positive, smart (better yet, smarter than you), supporters who will share wisdom and champion beside you during victories and when the going gets rough. Seek assistance when you need it. And always remind yourself to see the bigger picture when the smaller one seems daunting or debilitating. It is nothing that someone before you has not already encountered and conquered (or at least survived). Carve your path. Embrace the uncertainty of each day. And, finally, take up something new to keep you balanced while you practice - such as tae kwon do, painting, or race car driving.

*Danielle Long, The Long Firm PLLC, Rocky Mount, NC*
Work Hard

Work hard, but be honest about your limits. Your work will suffer along with your reputation for reliability if you accept more work than you can handle. A good way to check in with your superiors without looking like a flake is to say something like, 'I'm happy to assist with this project. Could you please help me prioritize which assignment you would like completed first?' Most bosses want you to do well since it makes them look good, though many do not personally keep tabs on your 'to do' list. Give your boss the benefit of the doubt and tactfully clue him or her in while reiterating that you are willing to do some hard work. If your boss doesn't support your growth, or if your boss routinely fails gives you a work load that can be reasonably accomplished well (and does not react positively to your tactful attempts to rectify the situation), it may be best to move on. Be your own best friend and look out for yourself. You will develop a stronger career, live more authentically, and be happier overall.

Ruth Goldner, Anselmi & Mierzewski, P.C., Bloomfield Hills, MI

Be Reasonable

Rule #1: Be reasonable with your clients and with yourself with regards to the amount of time you spend and the rates you charge.

Rudi Trader, J. Rudi Trader P.A., Melbourne, FL

Exude Confidence

You must tell yourself to exude confidence (hey - you made it this far!) and also be able to show humility. This is the practice (emphasis on practice) of law. Even veteran lawyers often make their way through a new or different situations (yes, there will always be new situations) by partially pretending to know what they are doing, or making a path that works for them - even when they don't know the rule, the law or the process perfectly. Don't be afraid to do that too! But when all else fails show humility - nicely ask the clerk if they know how something is usually handled, call the judicial attorney before the hearing for the insider scoop and even ask for a meeting in chambers or a side bar to ask the best way to handle a new situation. By doing so, you can find your best allies and at the same time never let the client see you sweat!

Heather Johnston

Talk Once. Listen Twice.

Emily Stroup, Upton, Mickits & Heymann L.L.P., San Antonio, TX

Listen to Others

Spend your first year really listening to others: your clients, your mentors, and your opponents. True listening is not often taught in law school, so don't be afraid to find a seminar or book on the topic. Practicing listening will set you up for a rewarding practice by enhancing your connections and promoting understanding and resolution. You will learn more than you can imagine by practicing true listening.

Chelsea Sage Gaberdiel, Osborn Maledon, Phoenix, AZ
Don't Get Discouraged

Don't get discouraged when dealing with more practiced attorneys. Some of the things they do will infuriate you, frustrate you and just seem downright immoral... but you must remember that there is a big difference between unethical behavior and zealous advocacy for their client. You cannot take their jabs personally. Their client could be wrong in every way but those older attorneys will defend and argue their client's cause because that is their job. Stop worrying so much about what the opposing side does and says to you, stand behind your work, and listen to the Judge. It is very hard to do this at first, but eventually, you will begin to see that you actually learned something in law school and that you can become a competent and compassionate attorney.

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