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DTCI: Practical Advice for New Lawyers from Less-New Lawyers

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By Molly E. Lee

I got the job. Now what?

Newly admitted lawyers ponder this question often. And many are too intimidated to seek advice from their colleagues. This article is set in the form of a roundtable discussion by three associates with varying perspectives and career paths. Recent newbies themselves, they are able to provide relatable and relevant tidbits for navigating the law firm world. Our panelists explore the trials and tribulations facing young lawyers and bestow practical advice for achieving success.

Our panelists

Christopher Appel (CA) – Christopher is an associate at Due Doyle Fanning & Alderfer. He practices in a wide array of areas, including insurance defense, premises liability and workers' compensation defense. Before joining Due Doyle Fanning & Alderfer, Christopher worked in rural Indiana and focused his practice on criminal defense and general civil defense. Christopher earned his J.D. in 2012.

Laura Brown (LB) – An associate at Krieg DeVault and member of the Governmental Affairs & Public Advocacy Group, Laura focuses her practice on representing clients at various levels of government and manages the federal, state legislative, state executive and local lobby compliance for the practice group. Before joining Krieg DeVault, Laura worked for the Indiana Senate as the deputy majority attorney. Laura earned her J.D. in 2014.

Jessica Olimb (JO) – Jessica is an associate at Taft Stettinius & Hollister and a member of the Private Client Group and Environmental Group. She focuses her practice on estate planning, probate administration and trust administration as well as environmental regulatory matters. Jessica earned her J.D. in 2014 and has practiced at

Taft for her entire career.

As a young lawyer receiving assignments and tasks from various partners at your firm, how do you stay organized?

CA: I keep a running Excel sheet for assignments, with a column for every partner from whom I receive cases, a column for a description of the assignment, and a column with the due date or target completion date. Putting a deadline or due date reminder on my Outlook calendar is also helpful for me.

LB: Understanding the various assignment deadlines for projects, as well as the level of importance of the project to the partner and client, allows me to organize my work accordingly. If a project is of high importance and under a strict deadline, I block out time from my day to dedicate solely to that project.

JO: One major key to success as a young associate is to stay organized. I have found that a useful way to keep organized when I receive assignments from various partners is to take notes during the initial meeting and then immediately calendar follow-up reminders for myself about the specific project and to calendar any important deadlines. In addition, I keep either an electronic or physical working file for any matter in which I am involved. When I am feeling particularly overwhelmed with the number of projects to which I have been assigned, I will also create sticky-note lists of tasks to complete that week or on any particular day. I then cross off each assignment as it is completed and toss the sticky note once all assignments have been completed.

What advice do you wish someone would have given you on your first day as a practicing attorney?

CA: Make sure you do all the easy parts of the job, because the work is hard enough. Return all your phone calls, complete simple day-to-day tasks on time, keep up on your discovery, etc. Don't make the easy parts challenging!

LB: I wish I had known that I still had a lot to learn. Leaving law school, I thought my memo writing skills were refined and well developed, but you have a completely different perspective when writing for clients. I therefore sought advice from senior associates and worked to improve my writing, even within the first year.

JO: On my first day as a practicing attorney, I wish that someone had advised me that all my colleagues were also rooting for my success as an attorney.

How do you maintain a work-life balance as a young lawyer?

CA: I try to make sure to get as much work done as possible in the business week so I can enjoy evenings and weekends with my family. When a trial is nearing or a court-mandated deadline for a brief is approaching, there will be long nights and weekends of work. Make sure you tell your friends and family about these demands on your time so they are aware you might have a long night or weekend at work.

LB: I am still working on this one honestly, but I think it is all about prioritizing — knowing when you really need to work late or attend a work event and knowing when you need to prioritize family time. If you do not balance both, I think they both eventually end up suffering!

JO: At first, it was difficult for me to find a work-life balance as I was concerned about constant “face time” in the office. However, I quickly learned how important it was that I take time for myself. I would encourage young attorneys to carve out time during the week to focus on their personal lives and their passions. The work-life balance will be different for everyone, but it is important that each attorney find a rhythm that works best for him or her.

What actions and attitudes do new lawyers need to avoid?

CA: Don't be difficult just for the sake of being difficult. There is a time and a place to put your foot down and

take a stand. Being overly difficult with every request from opposing counsel and making everything a fight is counterproductive. It wastes your time and your client's time and money. If you are constantly difficult, people will notice and your reputation will suffer.

LB: Isolationism is the attitude I would warn against. Although all lawyers enjoy their quiet time to work, getting out in the community and going to events assists with your practice so much. Being able to connect your clients with others in the community who may be helpful to them is a significant "add-value" beyond your legal work, so it helps when you actually get out into the community!

JO: I would encourage all new attorneys to remain humble yet confident. In addition, I would caution young lawyers against negative comments and behaviors, and would instead encourage them to act professionally at all times whether engaging clients, superiors or staff members. In my experience, kindness is always the best course and accepting criticism with dignity and respect is a valuable trait.

How do you interact with clients in a productive manner even if you are not the most senior and most knowledgeable attorney to answer their questions?

CA: Be honest with the client while giving the best answers and advice you can. Tell the client what you think, but you need to speak with someone with more experience with the particular issue before giving a complete answer.

LB: My mom always said, "Walk in like you own the place." At 28, I know I am not always the most knowledgeable person at my firm to answer a client's questions, but I have to be confident in conveying what I *do* know and identifying the resources and individuals with whom I will consult to more fully answer the client's questions. Following up with any additional information is key as well so that trust grows in the relationship.

JO: In a situation where an attorney may lack the knowledge to answer client questions, I would encourage the attorney to state that he or she would need to look into the issue(s) further, and to follow up with the inquiry at the attorney's earliest convenience.

As a young lawyer, how can you be proactive in bringing in new clients?

CA: There are plenty of capable attorneys and law firms out there. Make sure the clients feel like you are their attorney. Be available for them.

LB: The two clients I have brought in were referred to me by individuals with my previous employer, so my advice would be to leverage your relationships and always work to leave your best impression on professional contacts. You never know when they will lead to future business.

JO: Young attorneys should constantly network, develop business and connect with friends, classmates and colleagues in a meaningful way. The best way to bring in a client is to ensure that people know who you are, what you do and how to contact you. All my clients have come from either a personal relationship or from referrals from friends, family and classmates. I would also encourage young attorneys to become involved in the local community, whether through a charitable organization, bar association, public speaking event or other community activity, as these are great ways to form lasting relationships with a diverse network. •

Ms. Lee is an associate with the Indianapolis firm of Lewis Wagner and chairs the DTCI Young Lawyers Committee. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors.