

## One lawyer's advice for new lawyers

By Seth E. Darmstadter

Congratulations to those of you who recently have been admitted to the Illinois Bar. A special congratulations to the new admittees who actually have jobs; and an even more special congratulations to the handful of you who are newly admitted, have a job and whose law firms honored both your anticipated start date and your originally negotiated salary.

I distinctly recall the anxiety and pressure that mounted the moment I was admitted to the bar. Suddenly the expectations changed because “real lawyers” have real responsibilities. Billable hours, court appearances and accountability all became a simultaneous reality. Below are practical tips to help you not only keep your job, but ways to succeed in the difficult legal marketplace that all young lawyers find ourselves in today.

### Tip #1: Hustle, Don't Hide.

The most important thing you can do as a new associate is to keep yourself on the radar for positive reasons. Be the first to arrive at the office in the morning and the last to leave in the evening. You may not be swamped with work just yet, but you want to develop the reputation as the “go-to” associate who the partners can rely upon at 7 a.m. and at 7 p.m. Make your presence known – no partner is looking to assign work to her 9 to 5 associate who keeps her door closed in order to demonstrate her passive indifference.

### Tip #2: Create Balance

There is a recognizable difference between the enthusiastic, disciplined and well-prepared associate versus the “gunner.” Think back to your days as a 1L and remember the students who succeeded. It wasn't necessarily the dude in the front row with the shiny new laptop whose arm

constantly was in the air – it was that girl who always was on time for class, but not super early, who did her reading, arrived for class over-prepared (but didn't let everyone know it), stayed out of the law school gossip circle and always had a well-thought response when the professor called her name.

At this point, you do not know it all and that is to be expected. Ask insightful questions, always over-prepare and strive to completely answer the questions that are asked of you.

### Tip #3: Do Not Cut Your Own Time

I remember the first time a partner gave me a research question that I (unknowingly) completely misunderstood. It was just before 9 a.m. and I dove head first into the billing black hole that is Westlaw, spending hours searching for the perfect response to the question posed to me. Only after half my day was wasted, did I realize that I had gone 180 degrees in the wrong direction. I then properly refocused and I started over, ultimately completing my research memorandum around 2 a.m.

I emailed my work product and then I began to deflate. If I billed the entire 16 hours I had worked, then of course, the partner would question me as to why it took me so long to write that memo. He certainly would cut my time and worse yet, he would know that I was not the associate with all the answers, but instead someone who took 16 hours to complete a 10-hour project. I swallowed hard, wrote 9.5 on my time sheet (I know, show-off) and headed home.

One day, a partner who was reviewing my billing called me into his office and asked me whether I had been cutting my hours. I answered truthfully and explained my justification. He instructed me to stop, explaining that I was doing a disservice both to myself and the law



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firm. He taught me that partners need to know the actual amount of time that associates spend on assignments, both for the partner's own growth as a manager and for the associate's ongoing training. He also explained the economics of billing and assured me that at my level, I would not be penalized for having my time cut.

Following that partner's advice has since served me well. When you find yourself confronted with this issue, I urge you to engage in a similar dialogue — I expect that you too will be well served by the results.

### Tip #4: Find A Mentor

The most valuable person in a young lawyer's professional life is a willing mentor. Search for a senior attorney who will take the time to show you and not just tell you how to practice your craft. When you find that person, work harder for her than you ever knew you could work and don't look back. Your professional growth will astound.