

# New Attorneys: Tips for a High Trajectory Career

By Maggie Jessup

**N**ew attorneys are very conscious of how others are doing in the profession. They watch those few classmates who glide into great jobs with the coolest firms, the small percentage of associates who seemingly effortlessly leapfrog their contemporaries in the race towards partnership, and the very few partners who stand out as the recognized best among alleged equals.

Whether you're toiling on a delay-tactic discovery motion in a windowless room behind a faux marble facade at a mega firm or interning with a family law group hoping an associate's spot will open, you are expecting a very bright future — the amazing career you just invested three years of your life to earn.

Some lawyers get that career. Respect, high impact cases, seven figure earnings, an army of associates to handle anything they find distasteful, plus the time and means to pursue their favorite philanthropic activity. Unfortunately, the majority of law grads might at best see one of these rewards, some none. Those destined to remain in the ranks of the average join the professional fray and simply hope to magically become one of the fast rising stars. A handful of others take a proactive path; they focus on studying what the high trajectory careermasters do and learn the common recipe for creating their own amazing career.

So how can you grab your spot among the favored few? Add some octane to your career with these three steps.

**No. 1 — Learn the Business** : Law schools create great legal minds but do little when it comes to imparting business sense. The partners of any size firm are very aware of overhead and its components, the basics of cash flow, employee packages, and the other elements of profit, loss and the monies involved in running a business because their own compensation and the entity's viability are tied to each of these elements.

At a minimum you must learn these basics of the financial side of running a company and how they apply to the business side of operating a law firm. But to be a law star, you'll need to know much more. The woman in the corner office knows intuitively which are the highest profit clients and types of cases. She knows you can score the biggest antitrust case in history and be bankrupt in a few months because of cash flow; and she'll also have a ready source of capital to underwrite unforeseen opportunities such as this.

Which associate will Ms. Managing Partner favor with her mentorship and the most coveted assignments? The answer — the hire that can handle a conversation on the latest M & A activity among competitors, new billable fields with little competition, and be able to proffer ideas about enhancing firm profitability and value.

To the extent you don't have a blank look when you're among partners at the firm barbecue who are talking about Deft & Swift's takeover of an



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environmental practice that immediately adds eight figures to the firm's top line; you stand out as partner material among a crowd of non-business savvy associates.

**I**f you have an MBA, an accounting degree, or grew up in a family business you already have this career boosting talent and need only keep up with the latest biz news among firms. However, if you are lacking in the fundamentals of business catch some continuing legal education hours in law firm management or find a distance learning business program. Learning the business is one secret of the law stars.

**No. 2 — Get Smart** : Most recent law grads and young associates believe they're done with school for quite some time; they expect experience to be their teacher for the foreseeable future. While experience is indeed very important, this is the same path 99 percent of new lawyers and associates are following and thus it doesn't give the differentiation from the masses you will need to get ahead.

Associates with their eye on an early partnership grab the opportunity this creates while their contemporaries miss out. Simply, law stars get experience but they also spend time getting smart. There are three career maxing options here and you should do a mix. First, you're inundated with continuing education of the bar e-mails. Do more than the required and

specifically look for courses on emerging legal areas that are relevant to your present firm or to your career aspirations.

Next, get smart about non-legal subjects that are relevant to your practice. A new personal injury lawyer would do well to catch some basic emergency medical services training, an associate in a family law firm could benefit from a financial course on valuing family held businesses, and a would-be intellectual property attorney should attend a seminar on the rules and realities of venture capital funding. This sort of education can give you outrageous credibility in client meetings where you can perform well beyond partner expectations. You will be a better lawyer too.

Do you wonder if all this extra work and investment are worth it? When you thrill a client with your real world knowledge, rather than simply legal, the partner who brought you along for show will be talking about you for days. With consistent "Wow, that kid is smart" buzz among the partners, you can jump ahead years in your career almost overnight. When important clients start asking for you by name, your success is assured.

**No. 3 — Make Rain** : Tied directly to learning the business and getting smart is acquiring the single most important ability for a meteoric career — the ability to win big profitable clients for your firm. New associates are told that those who generate big billings are at the front of the line for partnerships. This is true but great rainmakers don't have to wait in that line; in fact they rule the profession and almost anyone can become one within a couple of years.

Most new attorneys recoil at the idea of networking and schmoozing at the golf club in the interests of business development and that's fine; because that is not how true rainmakers operate. You can become a client magnet by doing something much simpler and a lot more fun.

Fast rising stars learn about, and get very visible in, prospect-rich industry sectors. For instance, if you are an associate at an intellectual property firm, many existing clients and prospective ones deal with venture capital firms, software developers, anti-piracy organizations, and content creators. The idea is to step past traditional legal schooling and get involved in one or more of these areas; become an expert, become the go-to guy.

To do this, law stars will attend industry conventions or seminars, read industry publications, and subscribe to news services covering the deals and dealmakers in that sector. Few attorneys go to the trouble to do this so you will stand out from the very beginning. As you meet new people at industry conferences, talk to booth people at trade shows, and otherwise learn the practical realities of a prospect-rich industry sector, you will develop some deep industry knowledge.

In less than a year you can turn out some content for industry publications, made more valuable because you're an industry expert and also an intellectual property attorney, and your name will start to circulate. Soon you can solicit opportunities to be a panel member at workshops, often at large industry conferences. If you have developed good presentation abilities, keynote opportunities will soon follow.

Industry experts, who are also attorneys, attract a big client base. In contrast, legal experts who have only a collateral knowledge of the industry attract only sporadic clients. Become that expert, bring profitable new clients to your firm, and you will quickly become a recognized rainmaker and fast rising law star.

You must be different to stand out in a somewhat commoditized field. New attorneys and associates who manage the beginnings of their careers strategically will never be unemployed, will have less stress, and ultimately have to work less hours. Legal superstars know the business, invest heavily with both time and money to get smart, and they consistently attract profitable new clients. Want a corner office? It's 24 months or less away.



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