

## IN FOCUS

# SUMMER ASSOCIATES

## Professionalism is everything

Here's a primer to what the fledgling attorney needs to know to make the most of the summer.

By Thomas J. Coyne  
Special to the National Law Journal

There is no fixed recipe that will guide young lawyers in developing the skills and knowledge necessary to become successful lawyers. Many years of practice, however, teach that certain traits, practices and proficiencies help attorneys develop both professionally and personally. Lawyers who incorporate these behaviors into their everyday work experiences will find greater satisfaction in everything they do, which ultimately will translate into better service to clients and open the door for developing and cultivating client relationships.

Professionalism must drive everything an attorney does in his or her legal career. Colleagues expect it and clients demand it. It is critical

that attorneys demonstrate a level of excellence that goes above and beyond commercial considerations and legal requirements.

Key attributes of professionalism include:

■ *Character.* Honesty is a top character trait. One should not misrepresent, manipulate or create false impressions in any way. Bad news should travel fast. If there is a problem, it's better to let others know so it can be rectified or addressed immediately.

■ *Collaboration.* The job of young attorneys is to make the entire team successful. They should work in collaboration with others. They should be courteous to everyone, inside and outside the firm. They will want to make a concerted effort to remember names and to call everyone by his or her name, from the janitor to the managing partner.

■ *Confidence and presentability.* Attorneys are expected to be confident in what they do. Confidence is gained by developing a quality work product. If an attorney doesn't have confidence in him- or herself, others will not, either. One point is worth remembering: It is better to be silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt. Beyond that, lawyers are expected to dress appropriately at the firm and

when visiting a client. It is important to keep one's office well organized—attorneys will not trust work to someone whose office is disorganized. They will not bring a young associate to a client meeting if he or she is not presentable.

■ *Good work habits.* The young attorney who doesn't have enough work should seek it out. Young attorneys can ask partners and associates if they need help. If senior attorneys are not coming back with assignments, a young attorney may want investigate whether his or her past work needed improvement. There is a lot to learn in the practice of law, especially when first starting out. The only way to learn is to spend time working on many different projects.

■ *Communication and accessibility.* Attorneys need to communicate effectively with clients and other attorneys and to keep them advised of all developments. They must answer their phones. If they can't, they must return calls promptly. The idea is to impress upon others that one is available 24/7. Otherwise, clients and other attorneys will go elsewhere.

### Lawyering

Lawyering is an all-encompassing skill that reaches beyond an attorney's legal specialty skills. It comprises the qualities and attributes that enable

Thomas J. Coyne is a partner in the Cleveland office of Thompson Hine LLP. He can be reached at [thomas.coyne@thompsonhine.com](mailto:thomas.coyne@thompsonhine.com).

one to practice law in such a way that he or she stands out favorably from the competition.

The elements of lawyering include:

■ *Client focus.* Lawyers cater to clients, not to themselves. They should listen and be responsive to what the client wants. They should be present at work at least during clients' regular business hours or risk missing opportunities. They should read professional publications relevant to their clients' industries. Sharing articles or other information that would be of interest to clients lets them know that the attorney cares and is thinking about them.

■ *Written work product.* Attorneys should make sure everything they write is written well, even internal memoranda. It is a good idea to invest in oneself early and get a mentor to help one become a better writer.

■ *Problem-solving skills.* A client often does not need a yes-or-no answer. The most important thing is to give the client an idea—to not merely say “no,” but solve the problem. This may require creativity and work, but an attorney should find a solution to the problem.

■ *Meeting all objectives.* An attorney should strive to be an outstanding lawyer, with superior work product on all matters. Nobody wants to work with an “average” attorney. Lawyers get paid because clients pay the firm for lawyers' services. The firm gets paid when a client is satisfied. Clients are satisfied when they get results that meet or exceed their expectations. If expectations are different from anticipated results, the attorney must address the situation.

### Practice management

Effective practice management is essential to ensure that lawyers run their practices efficiently. Here are some examples of good practice management.

■ *Tracking the work.* It's a good idea

to keep a list of all pending assignments and provide timely reports and updates. One shouldn't rely on clients or other attorneys for reminders. Otherwise, clients and other attorneys will not offer additional responsibilities. Clients and more senior attorneys will have many more deals/matters to track than a young associate will. Associates need to make their lives easier, not more challenging. They should use the firm's document-management system, if it has one, and complete the document profile for proper storage and easy retrieval of documents.

■ *Timely service.* Attorneys should find out what the deadlines are when they receive an assignment, and get the work done early or get an extension if absolutely necessary. Otherwise, clients and other attorneys will not rely on them in the future. In order to meet a client's deadline, the attorney needs to complete the work well in advance to give senior colleagues the time to review and prepare it for submission to the client. At the start of a deal, the junior attorney should prepare a list of the players so he or she knows who is involved. He or she should maintain a checklist and track all items.

■ *Charging and recording time.* Attorneys should record their time promptly (i.e., every day) and accurately (i.e., to the correct client number). They should learn how to prepare proper time charge descriptions. These will be reviewed by the client, and should express the value of the time incurred. It is important not to spend more time on a matter than the client or assigning attorney expects. The junior lawyer should ask the assigning attorney how much time to spend on an assignment as soon as he or she receives it. Time spent on unnecessary work will not be charged to the client; the responsible billing attorney will incur a write-off charge and the offending attorney likely will not get work in the future from

the assigning attorney or the client.

■ *Asking for feedback.* After completing each assignment, young associates should ask the assigning attorney for constructive criticism. “Is there anything I didn't do that you wanted me to do? Did you expect anything to be completed differently?” One learns from critical reviews.

### Client development

It is never too early to begin thinking about client development. Friendships made in college, law school, and industry or community activities should be cultivated throughout one's career. There are many avenues to networking:

■ *Take a partner to lunch.* A partner is a wealth of information. Fledgling attorneys should take one to lunch and learn from what he or she has to offer, preparing questions in advance.

■ *Join bar associations and industry groups.* It is helpful to be active and join committees—and always to do a good job for them. Other attorneys can be a great source of work; they may refer clients when they are unable to serve them because of a conflict.

■ *Publish.* Placing articles in legal and business publications will get an attorney's name in front of other attorneys and potential clients.

■ *Learn public speaking.* Young attorneys should learn to speak effectively in public and before groups, then speak as often as possible at seminars and institutes to stay in practice. Speaking at these events can make a strong first impression on potential clients, helping a great deal in one's business development efforts. ■