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Advice From Those Who've Been There, Done That

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The game of law practice development has become more sophisticated and competitive. Attorneys responsible for revenue generation at their firms have felt prepared, perplexed and at times overwhelmed.

We've talked to a cross section of Boston-based attorneys about what they wished they'd known or done more of from the beginning of their practice. Their responses, in part, boil down to honing-in earlier and more often on business and practice development.

"What I realized about half way through my career was that I was executing someone else's business plan, not my own," says Jonathan C. Black, a partner at Brown, Rudnick, Berlack, Israels in Boston. "I found courage in my conviction that in order to make it, I needed to formulate my own business plan and execute it."

While it is imperative to begin marketing and business development early in your career, new attorneys must also balance their drive with the demands of working within the law firm environment. A new partner at a major Boston firm feels that one approach to striking a balance is to become an expert in a specific area.

"That knowledge base will attract clients and other attorneys," he says. "You can add value and be a team player at the same time."

Black echoes this sentiment: "When I became an expert, clients started coming directly to me. I had a tremendous amount of external support."

Career

A senior attorney at a boutique litigation practice in the Back Bay, meanwhile, didn't realize how hard it would be to make potential client contacts. "If I'd known, I would have started earlier with my Rolodex of contacts and a systematic plan to keep in touch with my network."

being referred a deal from a party who was on the opposite side of a deal I negotiated in the past. The transaction had been very contentious. I kept a level head and maintained a high level of professionalism — that's what brought the new work to me."

According to Todd & Weld partner Nicholas B. Carter, a lot of junior litigators find it difficult to maintain civil relations with opposing counsel. Separating the case from the opposing counsel

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To that end, Carol A. Hannigan, former associate counsel to MassPort and of counsel at Palmer & Dodge in Boston, says that joining organizations that potential clients belong to should happen early on in your career and that you must keep up your network.

"You never know where people will end up," Hannigan notes. "One of the biggest compliments I ever got was

leads to referrals, which helps build a practice, he says.

Though many attorneys went to law school to avoid things like finance and spread sheets, Danielle Y. Vanderzanden, an employment partner at Day, Berry & Howard in Boston, was "struck with this new awesome responsibility that I have to understand the finances, bring in work and oper-

ate as a business person.”

Partnership makes one quickly appreciate the need to understand profitability, productivity and the business of practicing law, she says. “When I stepped into my role, I took on the responsibility of training and mentoring associates in my group to enhance the practice and avoid the high costs of associate turnover.”

Attorneys becoming partners bring different levels of readiness when it comes to management and financial responsibility.

“I definitely wish there had been a partnership training course,” says Bret A. Cohen, a partner at Pepe & Hazard in Boston. Some of the issues Cohen feels should be covered are how to read spreadsheets; defining the terms of art in law firm economics like “realization rates”; understanding the various reports partners receive; leadership skills; and relationship building.

A new partner at a large national firm based in Boston agrees. “While in theory you understand that being a partner will be different, it would have been helpful to have issues like financial information, how the firm and compensation works, and how to be emotionally prepared for a decrease in work received from now fellow partners be addressed head on.”

A former partner at a mid-size firm in Boston recalls how even the smallest thing — like going from being paid once a week to monthly — required him to adjust not just his practice but his lifestyle as well.

Given some of the recent pitfalls Boston law firms have gone through, it makes sense for attorneys approaching partnership to understand

concepts like joint and several liability, financing of retirement benefits or compensation programs.

“Right now, it makes more sense for me to stay in my ‘counsel’ role than become a partner,” says an attorney with a financial district practice.

Simply put, it may not be as lucrative to become a partner or it may present too much risk. A former partner at a small firm in Boston found few monetary benefits to the partnership. “While I wanted the title and hoped that, coupled with my marketing efforts, it would bring me more work, in the end it just wasn’t worth it,” she says.

Sean Ploen, who practices copyright and trademark law at the Boston Law Group, a business-law boutique, has learned the benefits of becoming a trusted advisor to his clients. “Once we’ve forged a relationship, I’ve found that my clients consult me on many matters unrelated to their intellectual property.”

This type of relationship has led Ploen to value his referral network. If a matter is not within his area of expertise, he refers it out and has found that he often receives referrals back.

The trusted advisor role and a referral network, however, do not come overnight. Attorneys say they regret not having taken the time to develop deeper relationships with clients and other counsel over the years.

Understanding clients’ businesses and what they value is imperative, as is finding out how what you’re working on fits in the greater picture. “Few issues exist in a vacuum,” says one lawyer. “I wish I had made it a point earlier on to understand what is going on globally, rather than just be an order taker.”

For a junior associate, it helps to focus on clients of the firm that you would like to work with and get to know better. Invest in those select clients and seek additional opportunities to work with them. On the other hand, “doing the majority of your work for one client or on one large matter precludes you from getting the diversity or volume of work that is necessary to develop a larger network,” Todd & Weld’s Carter points out.

Clients don’t value the fact that you got them an answer by 2:30 p.m. when you said it would be there by 3. What they are looking for is counsel, not just a worker bee.

“I wish I’d have taken a more mature approach from the beginning and acted with confidence,” says a new partner at one of Boston’s largest firms. “Part of the problem was that my firm discouraged it, so I didn’t know how to handle myself with clients. No one appreciates a shrinking violet,” she says.

To be successful, attorneys need to exude confidence — if they are checking with a partner on every line of the draft, they aren’t adding any value.

“When I began my career, I heard a lot of people talk about the importance of mentoring,” says Wendell Taylor, a junior partner at Hale and Dorr in Boston. “I really didn’t appreciate what a good mentor was, however, until midway through my career. The people who have had the most lasting and positive impression on me have been those who have been generous with their time and knowledge. Ultimately, that type of generosity ensures that you and your firm are successful.” MLW



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