

HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR FIRST YEAR AS AN ATTORNEY

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Doing anything for the first time can be daunting, and being an attorney is no different. Many are the lessons and experiences acquired during the life of a pupil attorney. Here are eleven essential tips on how to survive your first year as an attorney:

1. Learn to communicate effectively

As a young and scared attorney, it is understandable to be afraid of speaking up. However, it is important to learn to be assertive early on in your career. It is particularly challenging to express disgruntlement, but breathe, compose yourself, then say what you have to say in a calm and respectful manner. You will also need the skill of effective communication to interact appropriately with clients and advise them correctly. As a young lawyer, you can expect to work in a team, and being able to communicate effectively and efficiently will make you a good team player.

2. Manage expectations

Closely tied to the ability to communicate is the ability to manage yours, your team's and clients' expectations. While it is important to meet your deadlines, it is equally important to communicate your inability to

do so to your team and be able to ask for extension of a deadline from your team or clients when needed. When asked on your ability to deliver, give yourself enough time to work on a draft, ask questions, submit, get feedback and work that feedback into producing an end product.

3. Be intentional about your growth and development

It is a fact that your employer or supervisor has the duty to provide you with opportunities for growth, however, it is your responsibility to take those opportunities, to study, ask questions, volunteer, increase your visibility at your workplace and educate yourself on disciplines outside your realm of practice to develop into a well-rounded lawyer. Most importantly, keep your personal career goals in mind and check in from time to time whether your work aligns with those goals.

4. Pay attention to detail

While this skill takes time to master, ensure that the minimum that you do is to double-check your work for errors prior to delivery. Ask your colleagues to proof-read your work before submission to your supervisor, as you might not notice errors you might have made, especially if you have been interacting with a document for long

periods of time. Typos and spelling errors are enough to make you lose credibility with your team or client. You want to give your team the comfort of relying on your work.

5. Be organized

There is always a lot of work to do, especially in big law firms. It is difficult to keep up with all of it by solely relying on your memory. That is why to-do lists are paramount to making your life as an attorney easier and keeping you out of trouble. Keep a diary, use sticky notes, a virtual calendar, or a white board to keep up to date with tasks that need to be completed. This will go a long way in helping you keep track of your work flow and to also determine your capacity for more work.

6. Treat all work with equal seriousness

Whether billable or non-billable, aspire to put your best foot forward in every task you are assigned to. No task is too minor. The important takeaway is that, if you can be trusted with smaller tasks, then in time you can be trusted with more complex tasks.

7. Be authentic

Let's face it, you're in a different environment from university. You are now in a formal environment. While the temptation is to blend into your work environment and let the parts that make you unique disappear into all the formality, don't cave in. As long as you abide with the rules and work hard, don't be afraid to laugh out loud, incorporate your individual fashion sense into your corporate outfits, and do the things that make you, you.

8. Take your downtime seriously

Make time for yourself to rest. Burnout is a reality in high-pressure professions like law. Desist from treating rest like a reward rather than an actual necessity. Do your favourite activities that help ease your mind. If you are an outdoors person, try to engage in at least one outdoor activity a week. Hang out with your favourite people, go to new places, read, watch football, or a series you like and anything else that interests you and helps you to refresh. Remember to enjoy the parts of yourself that are unrelated to work.

9. Support staff are your ally – treat them with respect

One unwritten truth about being a young attorney is that the way you treat and interact with the support staff at the workplace can affect the way you work. Be courteous to them and they will be much more willing to assist and provide support to you. After all, most support staff are familiar with the policies of the workplace and have grasped the unwritten cues of partners and associates and can help you navigate your life at the office.

10. Be patient with yourself

Understand that you will not know everything immediately. Extend yourself the grace to make and learn from your mistakes. Take every lesson as it comes, even if it is unpleasant. Take fair criticism as a way to improve going forward as opposed to a personal attack on your abilities or intelligence. Lastly, remember to maintain your self-confidence through positive self-talk.

11. Be patient with others

Sometimes your colleagues and seniors will make mistakes too. Be willing to extend the grace that you would appreciate.

Thank you for reading, I am [Phenyo Kedisitse](#), an Associate at [Bookbinder Business Law](#).