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the Advocate

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Go For It! Creating Your Path To Success



Life Cycle Of A Law Firm Attorney

By Jyoti Pandya & Erica Payne

Remember the day you received your law school admission letter and you thought you had your life figured out? That's never the end of the story, though. As we work through each stage of our careers, many wonder: "What's next? What can I expect?"

We have compiled thoughts and advice from CWBA members in four key stages of a legal career (law student, associate, partner, and retiree) to answer that eternal question: *What do you know NOW that you wish you'd known THEN?* We wanted to encourage honest insights about the good, the bad and the ugly of life as a female attorney. For that reason, some of the comments are anonymous. That way, you get the inside scoop, not the sugar-coated version that has you reading between the lines.

LAW STUDENT

Andrea LaFrance: University of Denver Sturm College of Law (3L)

"My journey through law school has been an incredible experience both professionally and personally. I was fortunate to meet my best friends in our 1L section, and it's crazy to see how much we've grown in the last 2.5 years. It's going to be really neat to see where we all end up."

Q: What makes a successful student?

A: Balancing hard work with down time.

"I've been most successful when I take time to refresh after intense periods of studying or work. I try to schedule time for the things that make me feel healthy and happy."

Q: What do you wish you'd known?

A: It's OK to take time to recharge.

"You can't learn it all in one day and you need to take breaks. During the first semester of my 1L year, I studied 12-15 hours a day leading up to finals and still wasn't happy with my performance. The following semester, I still studied quite a bit, but I took more personal days in order to recharge. My grades increased exponentially and have continued

to do so ever since I realized the effect of taking time to refresh."

Q: What surprised you?

A: Legal training impacts your non-working life.

"I think it's really neat to reflect on how much I've actually learned in the last 2.5 years and how I find myself "thinking like a lawyer" all of the time, including many situations outside of school. I'm constantly evaluating legal implications or taking some legal-minded approach, but sometimes it gets in the way of leisure time. For example, I was reading a non-fiction book this past summer and became frustrated because there weren't any citations or references. I'm officially a legal nerd."

ASSOCIATE

Anonymous

Firm: Confidential

Time in Position: Less than one year

Firm Size: Less than 10 attorneys

"Sometimes the surprises of the practice are thrilling and other times overwhelming. Before I joined my firm, I worked as a government attorney. The adjustment into private practice has been refreshing because my cases are a lot more fast-paced and complex. But I have struggled with understanding and capturing my billable hours. I work with really great people, the cases are interesting, and there is a lot of room for growth in my firm so I am often really fulfilled with my practice."

Q: What makes an associate successful?

A: Consider the big picture. "I go into my job every day with an idea of who I can help and how I can help."

I don't walk away every day having 'saved the day' but I ensure that I have contributed to a case getting closer to resolution. I try to keep perspective in my cases. Sometimes, squabbles happen and tempers flare but I take a step back, envision the big picture, and carry on. Most times, it usually helps me stay above 'the fray' or drama in cases."

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Q: What do you dislike about it?

A: "I am fortunate and thankful that there is very little I dislike about my practice. When I get together with friends with whom I graduated school, a lot of time is spent commiserating about the frustrations of the practice. I find that I run out of things about which to complain much sooner than my friends. The people I work with don't scream at me. There aren't big egos at my firm and people don't make power plays or use tactics to make others look bad. I would say that the only complaints I have are more related to my lack of experience than my work environment. I am very busy at work. I would also like for there to be more mentoring and more direction and explanation offered with most of my assignments. I am so bogged down with work most days that I can't even consider going to any CLEs, bar association meetings, or networking events. My friends share the same gripes so I know my situation is not unique but I would like to have more balance nonetheless."

Anonymous

Firm: Confidential

Time in position: 5 years practicing

Firm Size: Less than 10 attorneys

"Most of the time—I'd say 90 percent—I love being an associate. I have been given (or earned, depending on how you look at it) a lot of responsibility in a short period of time. Since I joined the firm, I have conducted depositions, been given my own cases to manage, and appeared at hearings and mediations on behalf of my clients."

"I want my career to be fun enough for me to not think so much about 'work-life' and more about 'life-life.' On a typical day, I am often challenged, stressed, overworked, bored, frustrated, proud, and engaged in equal measure."

Q: What makes a successful associate?

A: **Find a mentor.**

"Hard work, but that's not enough. Your hard work also needs to be noticed by the partners. You need to find a mentor. Ask questions. Be prepared and able to take on a lot of projects—but not more than you can handle."

PARTNER

Anonymous

Time in position: 8 years non-equity shareholder

Firm: Confidential

Firm Size: 30 attorneys

"As a partner, you are a business within a business."

Q: What makes a successful partner?

A: "Two things: becoming an expert in your areas of practice and business generation. It cannot be overstated how important it is to bring in a substantial amount of business. You will only have power within your firm if you have a big enough book of business where the firm would be substantially hurt if you left and took your business with you. Without that you are entirely dispensable and will be looked at as a cost center rather than a revenue generator."

Q: What do you like and dislike about it?

A: "I like the autonomy of controlling my own time. I dislike the constant striving for more - to keep up or surpass your partners, to always increase your business generation (through productivity and origination). I love what I do, although I don't always love the culture in which I do it."

Anonymous

Time in position: 18 years

Firm: Confidential

Firm Size: Large firm (250-1000+ attorneys throughout career)

"There are always pressures to deal with, both internal and external. Work-life balance is a myth; you just need to identify what is important to you and make it a priority."

Q: What makes a successful partner?

A: "Doing excellent work, being very responsive to clients, looking at issues from the client's business standpoint rather than from a purely intellectual legal standpoint, making an effort to understand what my clients do and what their needs are. Intellectual legal exercises are interesting, but most often are not what clients are seeking when they call me - they want to know 'Can I do this?' and 'How can I do this with the least amount of risk?'"

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Q: Advice for success at this stage:

A: “Business development is not as hard as it seems. **Do good work, be responsive, anticipate client needs – those are the basic threshold skills.** Keep in touch with your law school friends, college buddies, neighbors, etc. and develop those relationships. Ask for the work when it’s appropriate. You can’t just sit around and expect the work to fall into your lap. But you can incorporate client development activities into your everyday life.”

RETIREE

Lynda McNeive

CWBA Past President &

2008 Mary Lathrop Award Winner

Retired for nearly three years from Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, LLP, a firm that grew from 11 lawyers to 245 during her 32-year career.

Q: Describe life as a retiree.

A: “I am thoroughly enjoying my current status, but ‘retirement’ seems like a misnomer. Call it ‘**advancement**’ instead. There is so much to do, and my schedule is generally ‘what I want to do, when I want to do it.’ Volunteering with nonprofits, political campaigns, and pro bono legal work are still an important part of my life, and I enjoy having a more flexible schedule and feeling less rushed. **You don’t leave your conscience behind at the office.**”

Q: Thoughts on an Exit Strategy?

A: “My exit strategy from the firm began two or more years before I retired, with no specific retirement date in mind. I wanted to reduce my annual billable hours but did not need a set work schedule. I decided it was best to change my status from equity partner to non-equity and receive a salary, which could be done without any public announcement. I thought it was important that any change be invisible to clients and potential clients, in order for me and the firm to retain and develop business right up until I left. A key element of this strategy was to make sure during the last few months that I was not the only lawyer working on any given deal or with any particular client, so the transition was seamless.”

Q: Advice for success at this stage?

A: “(1) **Don’t put everything off until retirement;** if there’s something you really want to do, do it when

you are young enough and healthy enough to get the most out of it; (2) **Do start saving as soon as you start working;** take full advantage of any 401k, employer matching contributions, IRAs and other opportunities to build your retirement fund. ‘Live beneath your means’ was the mantra of Jack Hyatt, our firm’s longtime managing partner and a priceless mentor professionally and personally; (3) **Build a life you love that is not all work.** Your family relationships and your friends outside or in the legal profession will outlast your working career and enrich your life now and always; (4) **After you stop working, take the initiative to arrange get-togethers with former colleagues--don’t wait for them to call.** (5) Spouses need to have their separate interests and friends as well as things they enjoy doing together.”



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PUBLIC POLICY WORK IN ACTION

On January 28, 2016, the day before the seventh anniversary of The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the CWBA joined a news conference at the Capitol to announce our support of a package of pay equity bills that will remove barriers to women earning the same as their male counterparts.



CWBA President Elect Sarah Chase-McRorie spoke on behalf of the CWBA.

To see the list of bills we are supporting by monitoring legislation or taking a position on, please [visit the website](#).