

A New Associate's Excellent Adventure

Tips on how to wow if you land at a solo or small firm after law school.

BY CHRISTINA RICHARDSON

You've made it through law school, survived and passed the bar, and are ready to embark on the next phase of your adventure—life as an associate. Unless you clerked at a law firm before you graduated, you may have no experience actually practicing law. Let me warn you, it's not all *Boston Legal* or *The Good Wife*. There is a lot of lawyering to learn after law school. If you wind up at a small firm, you will need to pick up those skills more quickly than your big-firm friends. You will also get thrown into the exciting thick of things more quickly. What can you do to be an asset at your new job? Of course you want to dazzle everyone from the legal assistants to the senior associates with your astute legal insight, but there are a few other qualities to develop that will help you be an asset as well. At a small firm you may not have someone to help you all the time, and the faster you learn to do simple tasks on your own, the better. Use firm resources mindfully, and remember that you are one of those resources. When you are sent out to do your first deposition or hearing, be confident and do your best. If you focus on being self-sufficient, aware of your firm resources, and confident that you can get through the rough patches, you will also dazzle your new firm.



Self-Sufficiency

Lawyers are busy. Support staff is busy also. You may not be able to ask your supervising attorney all the questions you want before filing a response or before heading to the courthouse. Your paralegal or legal assistant may not always be available to serve and file your motions. Make it your mission to be as self-reliant as possible.

Learn how to use the firm's equipment. Learn how to use the fax machine and the copier. Learn how your firm files with the court, and be able to accomplish this on your own. Figure out the billing software and bill your time accurately and as you complete tasks.

If you clerked like I did, this may be your first job at a law firm. You are bound to have a million questions. Before you ask those questions, determine what you can answer on your own. Use your resources. What form books are available to you in your firm library or online? Check the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure for deadlines. *O'Connor's Texas Rules—Civil Trials* has the answers to many basic questions also. Ask your specific questions once you have answered as much as you can on your own. The senior attorneys and the support staff will appreciate your self-reliance.

Resource Conscious

Be mindful of your firm's resources. Learn how much your tools cost. Hiring a young attorney is a large expense for a small firm. Don't add to that expense carelessly.

Always keep in mind that your time is a firm asset. Use it wisely. Stay organized and aware of deadlines, both yours and of those with whom you work. Lend a hand when you can.

Find out how you are billed for your online legal research provider. Are you billed for the time you spend on Westlaw or LexisNexis? Then consider using free search tools like Casemaker on the State Bar website first to help narrow your search, then go to your provider. If you are billed for cases you print, again, use Casemaker for your initial results, then, once you determine what is most important, go back to your provider.

If a law library is close by, consider doing research the old-fashioned way and visit with the *South Western Reporter* in person. The law library will also give you access to all kinds of secondary sources that may not be available with your online plan. However, if you want to visit the library, go with a strategy. Have a list of sources. Talk to the librarian about the best place to get that source. For instance, most law review articles are available in PDF format on HeinOnline. The library is wonderful, but it can be a time sink if you are unfamiliar with it.

Stay conscious of what value you add to your firm and what expenses you incur. Your boss will appreciate you for it.

Confidence

At a small firm, you will attend routine hearings and depositions on your own, and it might be sooner than you feel ready. Be prepared, be brave, and just go. The firsts are always the worst, but I promise, everything gets easier with time, experience, and practice. If you make a mistake, learn from it, and do better next time.

Preparation is key for even routine matters. Review the local rules so you know what will happen at a docket call or a DWOP docket (learn what DWOP means). Know where to go before you leave the office, and leave with plenty of time to spare. Practice what you want to say out loud, in front of a mirror. It's easier to go into the unknown if you are adequately prepared. Bring an outline with you to hearings so you can review before you have to speak.

Don't let opposing counsel intimidate you. Focus on what you need to say, not on the fact that you know that they know that you are the new lawyer in the room. Look at the judge or the person you're deposing and ignore the eye-rolling, arm-flailing opposing counsel in the room. This is where you finally get to dazzle everyone with your legal acumen.

You will not be the baby attorney at your firm forever—if you help your firm grow. Be self-sufficient, stay aware of your resources, and remain confident in your abilities. If you keep these things in mind, you will be a valuable asset to your firm and will have ample opportunities to astonish everyone with your shrewd legal skills.



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