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## The Art of Balancing Work for Multiple Partners

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Anyone who has ever attended law school knows the intense pressure that law students face every semester. Overwhelmed with the amount of material that a first-year law student has to learn, all 1Ls know memorizing the substantive rules and concepts is only half the battle. To achieve high grades, law students have to write a completely different style and tone for each of their exams. A torts professor might expect definitions of any relevant legal terminology and a thorough application of rules that do not even apply to the exam fact pattern, while a criminal law professor prefers responses that are concise and to the point. As a first-year law student at Duquesne University School of Law six years ago, I thought to myself that I couldn't wait to be done with law school, where the law would be the law and I wouldn't have to alter my work product to the preference of any one person. I was wrong.

Three years later, I landed my first job working as an associate at a 14-attorney boutique family law firm. My workload consisted of assignments from all five of the firm's partners. I quickly realized that just like my law school professors, each partner had his or her own expectations as to the format and style of pleadings, the approach to preparing for a trial and the overall strategy to a case. The personal preferences of one partner were sometimes discouraged by other partners. In fact, one partner would often send me in a completely different direction than the other partner who was right down the hall.

In addition to learning how to fine-tune my work based upon the assigning partner, I faced the challenge of balancing the time commitment associated with each partner's case load. How could I make the



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brief I was drafting for one partner perfect when I had a huge discovery project going on for another partner? What about the trial I was supposed to second-chair the following week with a different partner? And how could I accomplish any of these things when I was presenting a motion in a county two hours away for yet another partner?

As time passes, the task of balancing work for multiple partners becomes more manageable, but other challenges arise. Now a third-year associate, my responsibilities are far more significant than they were when I was a newly licensed lawyer. Instead of doing research, sorting through discovery and second-chairing proceedings, I am now taking on a larger role in more complex cases, serving as the first chair in court proceedings and counseling clients independently from the partners with whom I work. In addition to working for partners, I am now building my own book of business and trying to balance the demands of those cases, which requires not only legal services to be performed, but also the time associated with practice management.

Meeting the expectations and time commitments associated with working for multiple partners can be done, but it might take some affirmative steps by you, the young attorney. Of course, the best way to become valuable to your particular firm is

to mold yourself to the needs of those for whom you work. That said, here are some suggestions that every first-year associate can rely upon to keep his or her head above water and outshine the competition:

### 1. Get organized. Stay organized.

The best way to instill confidence in your superiors is to show them you are on top of the things coming your way. Keep a to-do list and update it every day. Note due dates, deadlines and reminders on not only your own calendar, but the partner's calendar, too, so he or she sees you are cognizant of the deadline. Maintain a binder or folder of the memos you receive from partners with assignments and case updates. Communicate with your legal assistant to establish a system that will enable you and the people with whom you work to complete tasks in the most time-efficient manner possible. Keep a case list of all of your active cases, which should include items such as: the client name, the assigning partner, the opposing counsel, the judge and/or court and any pending court dates or filing deadlines.

### 2. Ask questions. Ask follow-up questions. Then ask more questions.

It is imperative, especially in the early stages of employment, for you to communicate with your assigning partners about what they expect from you. Find out how involved you should be in the case. Is your task to just complete the research memo or would the partner like you to take control of the file and serve as lead counsel on the case?

Ask questions about the logistics of handling the project. How far in advance of the filing deadline would the partner like to have a draft of the pleading? Does the partner prefer to have final signing authority on the pleading or is one cursory

review of the document sufficient? Does the partner want the client to see all preliminary drafts of the document or only the finished product? Does the partner want you to pull and summarize any cases or other authorities referenced in the pleading or does he or she trust your use and application of them?

Ask questions about the partner's preferred writing style and the presentation of the document. Is a detailed case history necessary or should you cut right to the disputed issue? How vibrant should your analysis be? How should you refer to the parties — by name, as plaintiff/defendant, as something else? What type of font does he or she prefer? Should the paragraphs be justified?

Ask questions about the partner's likes and dislikes. Does he or she have examples of good pleadings in other cases that you can review to get a better idea of what is preferred? What about examples of bad work product that illustrate what not to do?

In addition to asking questions, don't be afraid to answer questions that are asked of you. If a partner asks you if you have time to do something and you truly don't, be honest with him or her. He or she will be more upset if you take on something you do not have the capacity to complete and then do not give the assignment the time and effort it requires.

### **3. Talk to other associates and staff members.**

Perhaps the best way to get an understanding of what a partner expects and likes is to ask those who know best: other associates, secretaries, paralegals and office and billing administrators. Ask other associates for tips on the best approach to addressing the partner's needs, such as extra things that can be done to move a case forward or bring the partner up to speed on a particular issue. Does he or she prefer status memos? Should you schedule a time for the two of you to have a conference regarding the case?

Find out how the partner does his or her own work. Talk to his or her secretary about the tone and style that the partner uses when he or she dictates pleadings

and client correspondence and about considerations that should be given if scheduling the partner for a client meeting or court appearance. Talk to the billing administrator about common revisions on time entries by the partner and ways to draft favorable billing descriptions that will enhance the partner's client bills. Other individuals who support the partner are often the best resources for figuring out what is expected of you.

### **4. Plan ahead. Work ahead.**

Inevitably, you will face the day when a partner comes into your office on the day a pleading is required to be filed with the court with pages and pages of corrections and additions to the document you drafted. It will be much easier to make the requested revisions if you haven't backed yourself into a corner with your time and you are not facing imminent deadlines on other projects. The time commitments of a law practice are like a roller coaster. There will be very busy days and there will be days with fewer balls to juggle. Take advantage of those light days. Look at your case list (see tip No. 1 above) and see what projects you can work on in advance. Start compiling research for a brief that may not be due for another month. Put together a preliminary settlement agreement for a case close to resolution, knowing that you can fine-tune the details later. Prepare a discovery request for a case even if it has been relatively dormant. There are always items you can tackle to enhance your productivity. Even during the busiest of times, find ways to work ahead and avoid procrastination. Take work home even if you only have one free hour in an evening. Come into the office on weekends. The more you can avoid facing last-minute crunches, the better your work product will be and the happier your boss will be with you.

### **5. Embrace and encourage constructive criticism.**

As bright as you might be and as hard as you might work, as a first-year attorney (and after, for that matter) there are always things you can learn from your superiors. Don't take it personally. It's a necessary process in career development.

In addition to the feedback partners provide, do not be afraid to seek out advice and tips for improvement. Even if you receive a "great job," follow up with the partner about what you could have done to make the document better. If the partner is too busy to provide constructive criticism on a project-by-project basis, try to schedule a time for lunch or coffee every few months to obtain generalized comments on things you can do to grow professionally. Your superiors will never fault you for caring too much. The practice of law can be overwhelming in the early stages, but with a proactive approach, it is not only manageable, but incredibly worthwhile. Similarly, although balancing the workload of multiple partners or assigning attorneys can be intimidating, it will make you a better lawyer. Of the five partners in my firm, no two of them run their practices the exact same as the other. In fact, I am sure that no two attorneys in any firm run their practices identically. As you develop and grow as a lawyer, you will develop your own approach and style for practicing law. Learn from those above you and appreciate the experience. You will acquire different skills from each of them and over time you will find what works best for you. And before you know it, you will be one of the partners sending a new associate in a different direction than your colleague right down the hall.

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