

7 Habits Of Highly Effective Associates

By Natalie Rodriguez

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Law360, New York (October 08, 2014, 9:23 PM ET) -- An associate's work on cases or deals may not land him or her in the limelight, but supervisors are paying attention. And associates that form the kinds of habits that make them more effective on a day-to-day basis will get noticed — and called on for more important work, attorneys say.

“Once I become familiar with someone and I have an understanding that they've turned over every rock and looked at something a number of different ways to come up with a good solution or good suggestion as to how to move forward, I tend to go back to that person and ask them to work with me again,” said Pamela C. Hicks, a partner with [Beirne Maynard & Parsons LLP](#)

Here are seven everyday practices good associates make a priority.

They Get, and Stay, Organized

Associates with good organizational skills will make themselves invaluable to any team.

“There are often a lot of disparate strands of a case. ... It's easy to focus on one thing to the exclusion of others and the masterful associate is on top of all of them,” said Marc H. Axelbaum, a [Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP](#) partner.

One way to shine is by becoming the person that makes a master task list on a case and updates it regularly to make sure each task has an owner and that those owners are getting the tasks done by the set deadlines, according to Axelbaum. He talks from personal experience, having been that associate once.

The habit helped win him more attention from senior attorneys, and gave him an in to do the “fun stuff” of examining witnesses in court, reporting out to boards of directors and other trial work, he said.

Kieffer Johnson, an associate at [Beirne Maynard & Parsons](#) who has won high praise from supervising attorneys also thinks strong organizational habits are a key to success.

“In general, I strive to be organized and responsive. Not just in practice, but in my whole life, I like deadlines, I like to do lists. I make sure everything is calendared. I don't like missing a deadline,” Johnson said.

Similarly, [Windels Marx Lane & Mittendorf LLP](#) associate Tanya M. Mascarich makes it a point to ask partners or assigning attorneys upfront about deadlines and has, over time, learned to tell the difference between “soft” and “hard” deadlines depending on the attorney.

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“[B]ut until you do, treat everything as a hard deadline. Keep a list on a small pad by your computer or phone showing tasks that need to be done and their due dates, and update it regularly, such as every two weeks. Highlight ones that have to be done within the week and cross them off when completed. This helps to keep your focus on what needs to be done when you can be distracted by something that is more exciting but less time-sensitive,” Mascarich said, adding that setting calendar reminders on a computer can also be helpful.

They Respond Immediately

When a partner or senior attorney comes calling, never wait to respond.

“When the partner calls, to be either answering the phone or calling me back fairly quickly and being responsive to requests is something that is definitely an asset in an associate,” Jared L. Tardy, a director at [Goulston & Storrs PC](#), said.

It's best to not have things hanging over your head, so if it's possible to get a task done quickly — even if the partner says it's not urgent — do it then, Johnson said. You never know what might pop up later.

And even if you can't get to a task right away, make sure to acknowledge the task quickly.

“Whether that's just responding to say, 'Yes, I've got your email. I haven't had a chance to do this immediately, but this is when I plan to do it,' people know you're providing updates on status so they have an idea. They know you're working on it, they don't have to worry about what's going on,” said Danette Davis, co-chair of [Dentons'](#) U.S. associates committee and a real estate attorney.

They Research Even the Tiniest Details

To avoid being caught unprepared in the already high-stress arena of court, it helps to research the room you need to report to ahead of time, according to experts.

“I expect [associates] to be familiar with the layout of the courtroom and with what physical capabilities the courtroom has, in particular with regard to computer equipment and AV equipment. I expect the associate ... to make sure that all of our exhibits are going to show up and look good,” Hicks said, adding that it's important for associates to also be in the know about the requirements of a particular judge.

In the deals world, it can be a boon to prepare yourself for what the negotiating table will look like by doing online research about the parties that will be involved, according to experts. Use that research to come in with a list of things that might need to be done to move the ball forward.

They Act Like They Already Have the Job They Want

If you want to rise in your firm, start thinking like a senior attorney now, several experts said.

“A friend of mine who has been a lawyer longer than I have gave me the following advice when I was an associate: Be the partner, act like the partner in a case, put yourself in the

partner's shoes," Axelbaum said.

Look to anticipate all of the things that need to be done to move a case or deal forward and try to think strategically about the administrative and procedural issues that might need to be addressed.

"I really like to have someone who works with me and we figure out what needs to be done and I can trust absolutely to get it done," Hicks said.

Part of forming this habit is pushing aside any fears of failing or of being perceived as uninformed and saying yes to tasks or projects that might seem daunting, according to Windels Marx associate Eric J. Konecke.

"Truly effective associates also never say 'I don't know.' By that I mean, when they are given an assignment, they search for answers independently to get the job done rather than asking for step-by-step directions or throwing up their hands and telling the partner 'I don't know.' ... Sure, it's okay to ask your colleagues' opinions, but learn how to solve problems yourself and take responsibility for your own decisions," Konecke said.

Also, trying to put yourself in a particular supervising attorney's mindset can help how your work is reviewed, according to Davis. Get a sense of a supervising attorney's writing style, work habits and billing practices and try to make your work product consistent with what the partner is looking for.

"It just makes the partner or assigning attorney's job easier when they're reviewing the work of the associate," Davis said.

They Anticipate

In line with putting yourself in a partner's shoes mentally, it's important to get in the habit of anticipating future requests or questions. Prepare for them beforehand and you'll find yourself becoming an invaluable team member, attorneys say.

"Remember that you are in a service industry. Just like a great waiter at a restaurant, the best associates will anticipate needs before they arise. For an associate, instead of refilling a glass before it is empty, we need to prepare for questions or issues a partner or client will raise before they are asked," Windels Marx associate Daniel J. Shim said.

If an issue comes up, consider the possible solutions and be prepared to offer your opinions on those solutions when you notify an assigning attorney of the problem, Davis said.

They're Always Looking for Connections

Continually being on the lookout for new mentors, staff and other associates that you can go to for advice can pay off big over time when you need to help with a question or need examples of certain contract clauses or lease forms, noted Tardy.

It also helps bolster your profile at the firm.

"I was in the habit of in-person questions. Going into offices, rather than sending emails

or leaving voicemails. I found that to be more productive for a couple of reasons. One, you get to know people better and two, you get more attention obviously if you're in front of someone," Tardy said,

Make every effort to attend marketing events and internal firm functions, advised Windels Marx associate Patrick M. Deyhle.

"Getting your name and face out there are more important than you think and is not just for partners," he noted.

They Act as if They Work Alone

To become the most effective you can be, get into the practice of acting like there isn't anyone to catch a mistake before your work goes to a client or a judge.

"One assumption every associate should make is that everything they produce could go to the client without review, even though it probably won't. That's the standard you should try to be employing as you prepare your work. Don't assume you're going to have a court of last resort. You should assume that the partner expects the work to be client-ready," Tardy said.

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