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What Associates Need To Do To Stand Out

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Law360, New York (January 14, 2015, 3:14 PM ET) -- It's difficult to get noticed as an associate. You're hustling to meet demanding deadlines and learn on the job, all while trying to get a leg up. So, what should you do? Here, more than 20 veteran attorneys weigh in on the things associates should be doing to stand out and move up at their firms.

Joan Ackerstein, [Jackson Lewis PC](#)



“If you want to get ahead as an associate, always provide great customer service to partners, just as partners do to clients. That means meeting deadlines, turning in only your best work, taking ownership of matters, and making recommendations to address and resolve upcoming issues. Use your time efficiently, stay focused, think creatively and cultivate passion about your work. And just as importantly, remember that — like clients — partners want to work with smart, hardworking lawyers who are also multifaceted and interesting to be around. A good sense of humor is always helpful, both at the firm and in growing a practice.”

Bill Adams, [Michelman & Robinson LLP](#)

“With so much legal research done on the Internet, junior attorneys frequently just re



opinions and statutes. Thorough research is time-intensive and necessitates an in-depth analysis in order to fully contextualize a case. Along similar lines, young associates are often too quick to come to senior associates or partners for help without first attempting to really recognize the problem and propose one or two solutions. Attorneys should strive to be problem solvers. Lastly, junior lawyers can't neglect business development — becoming proficient in the business of law is fundamental and will make associates valuable, helping them get ahead."

J. Scott Ballenger, [Latham & Watkins LLP](#)



“Impeccable legal work is critical, of course, but there are other ways to stand out. At Latham, we have a committee structure that invites associate participation in many aspects of the firm’s business, from diversity and pro bono initiatives to ethics and recruiting, and even associate development and career advancement. Getting involved with initiatives like these, whether they exist formally or not, demonstrates business savvy and a commitment to the practice of law — and can add value in ways that are noticed by people in and outside of your firm.”

Bob Benjy, [Frاندzel Robins Bloom & Csato LC](#)



“Associates should take ownership of matters they are brought in on, versus wiping their hands clean of it the moment the discrete assignment is completed. Take charge, follow up and follow through. Show enthusiasm, diligence and a sincere interest in achieving the client's goals. For example, even when handling a discrete assignment, make sure to calendar all applicable dates and deadlines for all attorneys working on the matter; double check service lists for accuracy prior to serving papers; and make appropriate recommendations to the supervising attorney, with an eye on being proactive, not reactive.”

Megan Ward Cascio, [Morris Nichols Arsht & Tunnell LLP](#)



“As the Morris Nichols hiring chair, I always look for students with analytical, writing and verbal skills as well as great academic records as a foundation from which to develop a good lawyer. However, I find that the best associates also demonstrate by their actions a desire to learn the law and practice. They are inquisitive and seek to understand how the facts, law and strategy fit together to reach a desired outcome. They are self-motivated and go beyond the tasks they are given to anticipate the next steps. And, they do not shy away from new and difficult challenges.”

Michael Celio, [Keker & Van Nest LLP](#)



“Excellent work is a given; the associates who really impress are the ones who understand that no matter how junior they may be, they are professionals representing real human beings with real problems. Whether the client is a harried in-house counsel trying to please her executive team or an individual desperately fighting for his freedom, every task should be done with a focus on solving the real problem that we were hired to solve. Even the most minor tasks — especially the minor tasks — only make sense when seen in light of the client’s real problems.”

Clay Custer, [Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice LLP](#)



“First, an associate should be highly responsive, accessible and visible. The associate who habitually 'works from home' is much less likely to get asked to work on a sophisticated new matter than is the associate sitting in her office next door to the partner. Second, the leading associates create time to chat with partners 'off the clock' about firm matters, join key professional organizations and make a point of knowing clients and their businesses well. Finally, successful associates learn quickly to delegate work to paralegals and assistants while maintaining rapport and a respectful relationship with them.”

Jessica Delbaum, [Shearman & Sterling LLP](#)



“Associates who want to get ahead should be proactive and not only seize opportunities as they arise but also create their own opportunities. It is important to think beyond the task at hand and learn to anticipate future requests or needs. Being enthusiastic, enjoying what you do and communicating that to others goes a long way too. Associates are assumed to have the necessary substantive and technical skills, but they must also take charge of their careers and fully commit to everything they do. Those who do will stand out from the crowd and lay the groundwork for a successful career.”

Serena Hallowell, [Labaton Sucharow](#)



“You want to take time to make sure that you are regarded as an associate who delivers on more than one front. Working hard is only one part of the equation. I want to work with and elevate smart, confident associates who demonstrate good judgment, strategic thinking, and an ability to work with and manage others. So you want to seek out and request opportunities that will allow you to demonstrate those qualities if you possess them. Ask to take a deposition. Start taking charge of the weekly meeting. Lead where you can, and do it well.”

Katherine Kimpel, [Sanford Heisler Kimpel LLP](#)



"Any associate who wants to stand out should do everything they can to make themselves invaluable. Never resting on delivering only what has been asked, the exceptional associate will be proactive about identifying additional opportunities to contribute to their cases and their Firm. They will be tireless in their commitment to excellence and will be creative in thinking about what new or fresh perspective they can bring to a case. Equally important, they will be honest with themselves and others about their shortfalls and will be excellent observers that learn and grow by watching the expertise and experience around them."

Antony B. Klapper, [Reed Smith LLP](#)



"Five keys to being a successful associate: First, produce quality. Treat all work-product as needing to be client-ready. Second, be fearless. You want the reputation of someone willing to jump out of the airplane (with a parachute, of course), and not the shrinking violet. Third, find a good mentor. A good mentor cares about your personal growth, gives you opportunities and shares in the credit. Fourth, communicate. No one likes surprises. Fifth, begin building business. Keep in contact with your law school classmates and take on leadership roles in civic activities. You never know who will go in-house."

Sharon Kroupa, [Venable LLP](#)



"Be responsive: Return calls promptly and do what you commit to do, in the timeframe that you commit to do it. Be willing to operate outside of your comfort zone: Uncharted waters can be scary, but also provide the best opportunity for associates to develop unique expertise in developing areas of the law. Give each project your best effort: Be sure to peel back the layers and address issues that are lurking below the surface. Be willing to admit that you don't know all of the answers, but you will pursue them vigorously."

Marc Latman, [Smith Gambrell & Russell LLP](#)



"Understanding the different expectations of people you work for is crucial. All partners likely want to see interest and eagerness from associates on their projects, but how to demonstrate that can be hard to know. To some, interest and eagerness is best demonstrated by attentiveness, timeliness and an eye to detail (spelling, grammar, etc.). To others, it is best demonstrated by not letting them 'feel' they are more vested in the project than you (i.e. slow responses to emails, office lights off early/late, not interested in 'chatting' about the project). Being good at 'reading' people's wants is an invaluable skill."

Amy Laurendeau, O'Melveny & Myers LLP

"Associates can get caught up in the day-to-day deadlines, discovery obligations, briefing and trial preparation that go with being a litigator. But your role is not just to write eloquent briefs and achieve other litigation 'wins.' It's critical to also understand your client's business strategy and recognize its immediate and long-term goals, which should guide all aspects of the litigation. The earlier you learn to partner with your client to help them accomplish their greater objectives, the more successful you'll be."

Tom McConnell, [Miller Starr Regalia](#)

"The best associates assume an ownership mentality from day one. Associates should treat every task as if they are dealing directly, and exclusively, with the clients. Rather than merely responding to tasks presented, associates should think proactively about what needs to be done and how best to get it done. Don't shy away from offering opinions or debating a partner's approach to a case (respectfully, of course). There is nothing more valuable than an independent-thinking associate who endeavors to understand the big picture and proposes suggestions about how to secure the optimal results."

Garret Murai, [Wendel Rosen Black & Dean LLP](#)

"Two words: Own it. Treat every matter as though it was yours. So how are you going to win that case or successfully close that transaction? Speak up. Take action. This isn't a practice run. Rare is the case I've seen that will try itself. In fact, I've never seen one. So stop worrying about making a mistake or committing malpractice and 'learn' to do it ... on your own. That's why they call it the 'practice' of law, because you have to practice doing it. And if you're afraid of that, then my friend, you're in the wrong profession."

Jeremy Rosen, [Horvitz & Levy LLP](#)

"When I was a young associate, one of my first appeals dealt with an area of law that no one in the firm had much experience with. A senior partner told me that it would be wonderful if I could take the time to learn everything I could about that area through attending seminars and keeping up with the emerging new case law. By the time I was a senior associate, I was the recognized expert on that area of law in the firm. Now, 40 appeals later in that area, I have found a professional niche."

Michael Rosenberg, ROIG Lawyers

“As the firm’s managing partner, I believe that all associates should strive to become well-rounded attorneys. Based on the avenue that I took to become partner, I would recommend that associates set themselves apart from their counterparts by taking on specific projects aside from their case load, achieving an unprecedented victory, bringing in new business and gaining more exposure for the firm. Networking is an essential tool in an associate’s path to partner and in becoming a versatile professional. The connections an associate makes within their community will help define them and propel them into becoming a noteworthy partner.”

Garrett Sanderson III, [Carroll Burdick & McDonough LLP](#)

“Know the facts of the case, including what all witnesses say. Know the law applicable to the adversary’s claim or principal defenses. Develop a strategy to win the case and present it to the partner (having one shows the ability to think strategically, long-term and see the big picture) — it’s better to propose something than nothing. Volunteer for things. Know key deadlines. And pursue marketing opportunities (articles, speaking engagements and committees) in areas germane to your practice or a practice you want to develop.”

Gary L. Sasso, [Carlton Fields Jordan Burt](#)

“Associates need to take ownership of everything they do. This means being driven, diligent, trustworthy, creative, thorough, highly ethical and professional at all times, and accountable for the client’s success, as the client defines that. They also need to be good communicators and have both courage and humility.”

Courtney B. Staffeld, [McKool Smith](#)

“When I was a fifth-year associate, a senior partner encouraged me to not be afraid to speak up and offer my thoughts on case strategies and next steps. This was very helpful and empowering advice. I eventually learned that even if the partners didn’t agree with my suggestions, my thoughts were always appreciated and were often used as a springboard for our team to develop creative approaches to litigation strategies. Associates who regularly propose next steps not only demonstrate that they are on top of the upcoming issues, but also assist in efficiently moving cases toward resolution.”

Chad Stegeman, [Carroll Burdick & McDonough LLP](#)



“Associates stand out when they ignore the title and engage simply as lawyers and counsel to clients. It is crucial to understand what is important to the client, what the motivations are behind filing a given motion, knowing potential repercussions, and to find a way to advance the client’s endgame. Thorough understanding of a case will also give you the context to find solutions to advance the client’s interests. Whether you are doing research, putting together discovery requests or deposing a witness, having the full picture will give you latitude to be creative and circumvent apparent obstacles or dead ends.”

Rhonda J. Tobin, [Robinson & Cole LLP](#)



“The key to moving ahead as an associate is to understand that it is a marathon, not a sprint. You have to be excellent at your job first and foremost, but you also need to think about what you are communicating internally and externally at all stages of your career. Take the initiative to ensure you are getting the experiences and opportunities to succeed. Seize every chance to raise your profile within the firm and to network externally. Regularly spend time thinking of ways to build your reputation, and solicit feedback and advice from firm leaders. Be positive and collaborative.”

Jed Wulfekotte, [Stein Mitchell Muse Cipollone & Beato LLP](#)



"Become an expert in high-value subject matter that no one else is tackling. Associates tasked with document review and fact development can understand critical aspects of a case at a deep level, and thus make themselves very valuable. Likewise, associates who make themselves experts in emerging areas of law position themselves as go-to resources within their firms."

Audrey Wisotsky, [Pepper Hamilton LLP](#)



“Partners sleep better when they know an associate has taken 'ownership' of a matter. Associates should demonstrate that they are thinking strategically about the next steps in a transaction or litigation, and making meaningful progress. Those who only perform assigned tasks — even if he or she does a good job — will not stand out. What’s more, supervising attorneys will be most appreciative when an associate steps up for emergency or very difficult assignments. Associates should also have their fingers on the pulse of significant issues in the practice area, always thinking about business development opportunities and assisting with marketing efforts.”

--Editing by Chris Yates and Philip Shea.

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