Mastering Time Management as a Junior Associate

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From an early age, we are conditioned to do our homework on time, complete chores without delay, and balance extracurricular activities and family time. The time-management skills we develop over the years are naturally beneficial, but they do not seamlessly translate to associate life at a law firm. This is particularly true after college and law school where we grow accustomed to each professor handing out a syllabus at the beginning of the semester to highlight the course assignments, reading lists, and exam schedule.

Essentially, we lawyers (particularly those, like myself, who did not have a career prior to attending law school) enter the workforce without ever really understanding how to manage a constantly changing schedule with a smorgasbord of personalities you cannot escape after one semester. Wouldn't it be nice to have a syllabus each quarter from the partners you work for so you know what assignments you will have and when motions are due? Of course! Is that a realistic hope? Not even remotely. If you find such a job though, let me know.

So what do you do when you start working at a law firm and you suddenly have three, four, five assignments from different partners that all must be completed immediately? The first step is to take a deep breath. We have all been in your shoes and there will be many after you who will have that same trepidation about entering the workforce after years of structured schooling. Don't fret though, while there is an initial learning curve, if you follow certain steps, you, like those before you, and those after, will hopefully be a go-to associate in no time.

- **Gauge and Set Expectations.**

After sitting through the inevitably droll new employee training, finding your office (and realizing you have nothing to fill it with), completing the seemingly endless list of employee paperwork, and getting overly excited about having business cards with your name on them, you are finally ready to get an assignment. Time management starts immediately with the initial discussion about the assignment. You must be sure to find out: background facts; any assumptions underlying the assignment; documents that may be helpful to you and where they are located; jurisdiction; if there is a time limitation on this project (e.g., one hour, three hours, etc.); and, most importantly, when the assignment is due. These questions gauge the expectations of the person giving you the assignment.

At the same time, if you find yourself suddenly juggling multiple assignments (which is likely), make sure to set expectations by explaining the other work you have. Of course, only you are responsible for getting all of your work finished, but it is important that the person giving the assignment understands your workload. For example, a common scenario for any associate is that a partner will suddenly need a new assignment completed without delay and you already have other assignments due. It is important as an associate to learn how to handle this situation. You absolutely do not want to say no to the partner, but at the same time you want to be sure to manage your schedule without taking on too much and potentially submitting poor work. Practice Tip: instead of saying no, the better approach is to inform the partner of your other work and offer a realistic timeframe for completion of this new assignment. If the partner truly needs the new assignment completed immediately, they may have to get someone else. So long as you set expectations up front, you will be fine and the partner will appreciate it.

- **Ask for Advice From Your Peers.**

Most new associates, with some exceptions of course, are hired by law firms of varying sizes who also employ other, more seasoned, associates. I cannot stress enough the benefits of befriending as many of these associates as you can in the initial days and weeks at your new law firm. Not only is it important to feel connected to colleagues who will see you sometimes more than your family, but these other associates are an invaluable resource for you as the new associate because they (should) already know and understand: the varying personalities within the law firm; how to best manage these personalities; the preferences and expectations of specific partners and counsel; and any glaring quirks you should know about as you start to get assignments from partners and counsel (and trust me, there will be quirks that you never anticipated). Practice Tip: why "remake the wheel" by learning the answers to these questions on your own when others presumably have the answers and are willing to share.

When I was first starting out at a law firm, I was told that my first assignments should be excellent (not OK, not fair, not even good). Scary right? Naturally. However, I've learned that this advice is exactly right. As we have discussed in other articles, your reputation (at your law firm and beyond) is everything, and developing a reputation early as an associate with a stellar work product is key, particularly when we as associates live and die by our work. Because of the importance of your work product, when you get your first assignments, talk to at least one more senior associate about the assignment and the person giving it to you (this assumes you have already taken the diligent steps discussed above in "Gauge and Set Expectations"). Likewise, when you finish your first assignments, do not be afraid to ask a more senior associate to review your work. Most associates are willing to help and the edits they provide could be the difference between you submitting a good work product and an excellent one.

- **Prioritize Prioritize Prioritize.**

A vital aspect of balancing your workload as a new associate is effectively prioritizing assignments. By now you should have (hopefully) learned how to prioritize homework through years of schooling. These skills will prove critically necessary in law firm life. Learning to prioritize assignments is really no different than prioritizing homework except that there is usually less time to complete assignments and you do not often know what other assignments are headed your way. It is this lack of extended time for completion and inability to plan that are the main reasons to develop a system early to keep track of assignments.

Maybe you are a list person? Maybe you need to calendar everything in Microsoft Outlook? Or is a dry erase board on the wall essential? Practice Tip: I make a list of all of my assignments with due dates and cross out each when completed to show progress. Whatever your preferred method, so long as you stay organized, you will be able to effectively manage your time and still have some semblance of a social life outside of work. Of course, there may be times when even the most organized associate will have trouble prioritizing assignments. When this happens, and it will, do not be afraid to seek help determining which assignment should get your immediate attention and which might be able to wait a day or two. If you are having trouble prioritizing your assignments or feeling overwhelmed with work, you must make it known immediately.

Life as a junior associate is both exciting and slightly terrifying. What you are working on is no longer a theoretical problem crafted by academics, but a real issue that may directly affect a client's case. Only through effective time management can you become a go-to associate who is sought after and respected. And yet, developing the skills necessary to manage your time as a junior associate will not happen overnight, but with practice these skills will become second nature. Soon enough, you will be the one giving advice.

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