

# Take Charge of Your Career: Five Things Every Law Student and Young Lawyer Can Do

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The legal industry is changing. So, too, is the path to a successful career in law. These changes impact the practice of law, the business of the practice of law, and legal education itself. Richard Susskind has proclaimed “The End of Lawyers,” describing a process by which technology is converting much of lawyers’ work from one-off custom work to standardized, automated, computerized processes. Professor William Henderson of Indiana University has written extensively about the changing dynamics of the legal market, questioning whether the traditional auction among law firms for top-ranked graduates from top-ranked law schools is a recruiting model that actually works well for most of the legal industry. And a study by the Carnegie Foundation has recommended significant changes in the way law schools educate lawyers.

One thing is clear: across the board, institutional change is coming. But the pace of institutional change is slow, and almost certainly takes longer than a single student’s legal education. So what can you do about it, right now?

The most important thing you can do is to take your career into your own hands. Long-term career success will come from providing value to the people who pay the bills – the clients. In theory, doing what it takes to succeed in law school, and to succeed as an associate in a law firm, should set you on the path to provide value to clients. But in this period of seismic change, you can’t count on those as sufficient steps. Based on my combined fifteen years of experience as an associate in an AmLaw 100 firm, a partner in an elite litigation

boutique, and a law school teacher and administrator, here are five things you can do, on your own, to improve your odds of long-term success.

**Go international.** Business is global. Daily life is increasingly global. Do something – anything – to expand your international horizons. Learn a language, or improve your skills in a language you have already studied. Study abroad for a semester. Yes, during law school this involves choosing a trade-off between studying abroad and working on a journal or doing moot court. All of these activities have their value. But do this simple thought-experiment: how many people can you imagine saying, “Working on law review really changed my life!” And how many can you imagine saying, “Spending a semester in Berlin [or Shanghai, or Istanbul] really changed my life.” Which is true for you? Act on that.

**Learn to read a balance sheet.** Clients are increasingly savvy, and cost-conscious, about the value their lawyers deliver. Often, a lawyer’s ability to deliver value depends on the lawyer’s understanding of the client’s interests. Often, those interests will depend on the financial bottom line. Knowing how to read, analyze and apply balance sheets, profit and loss statements, and other financial documents is an essential part of your ability to know whether you’re adding financial value for the client. To be sure, many lawyers will represent individuals or organizations that are caught up in dramas not strictly related to financial interests, and you should be prepared to add value to those clients as well. But this really is a basic skill that you should master.

**Learn about the business of law practice.**

Start with this question: “How is it possible that a new law graduate is worth \$160,000 per year, plus benefits and overhead, to a law firm?” During flush times, we are all inclined to answer that question with this: “Because I’m so awesome!” During the recent economic downturn, however, an increasing number of law firms effectively reached the opposite conclusion, cutting way back on their entry-level recruiting. Many lawyers, at all stages of practice, have elected small firm or solo practice.

Whichever path you choose – and while you’re deliberating over that choice – you should be well-informed about what the business model is that supports your place in that kind of practice. It is unlikely that you will find a one-stop shop to impart this knowledge to you. Few law schools offer courses in this area. Most bar associations (including the ABA) have “Law Practice Management” sections that may offer some useful insights. Above all, you should talk to lawyers in a variety of areas of practice who have management experience. Be curious, tenacious and creative in your search for this knowledge. Ultimately, it will be critical to your long-term job security.

**Do what excites you.** Lawyering involves working long hours. Working that hard on something that’s tedious, boring, or even at odds with your personal morals, can take years off your life and turn you into a bitter, unpleasant person. Whether you’re excited

by saving the planet, professional sports, learning new technology, building cities, or just being close to money and power, there are segments of the legal profession that will excite you. These aren’t the same for everyone. And not all of them are sexy or prestigious. Be honest to yourself about what interests you, and figure out how to blend that with a legal career.

**Build a network of people you like and trust.** Ultimately, job security and advancement depends significantly on having supporters. In private law practice, you need clients. Many good client referrals come from people who know you and trust you. As a recent law graduate or junior lawyer, it is pretty rare to already have senior in-house decisionmakers in your social circle. If you do, lucky you. For the rest of us, think about who is likely to be in a position to refer work to you in 5 or 10 years. It’s likely to be a pretty diverse group – not just people who went to your law school, or who practice the same area of law as you – in fact, that list may be largely non-lawyers. And 5-10 years is a long time just to pitch some work; but if you also happen to like being friends with these people, the time will pass more pleasantly.

Of course, in these changing times, nothing is a sure bet. These five things could help, and, regardless, they are sure to make life’s journey more interesting.

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