

What Young Lawyers Are Getting Wrong

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360 (August 6, 2019, 3:40 PM EDT) -- Young attorneys enter law firms full of ambition and motivation to succeed, but there are a number of major mistakes many of them end up making early on in their careers that can thwart their goals.

During recent Q&As with Law360 as part of an ongoing interview series, leaders from Crowell & Moring LLP, Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky and Popeo PC and several other law firms pointed to the most common career blunders they see new attorneys make. The mistakes they've observed often fall into two broad categories: improper career development and a failure to effectively communicate.

When it comes to communication, managing partners said young attorneys need to ask more questions, graciously accept criticism, and communicate regularly with old acquaintances and friends.

New attorneys are all too often afraid to ask questions of those around them because of pressure to always seem supremely knowledgeable, but that is a mistake, according to Tarter Krinsky & Drogin LLP managing partner Alan Tarter.

"One of the wonderful things about practicing law is we always get to learn new things every single day," Tarter said. "The attorneys that embrace that challenge — they're not always going to know the answers and they need to research and learn — they're going to build a magnificent foundation for their practice."

That need to ask questions extends to interactions with partners, said Quarles & Brady LLP chair Kimberly Leach Johnson. One big problem she said she sees is when associates fail to communicate sufficiently with partners about not understanding assignments or if they feel like they're in over their heads.

"[They need to] make sure they fully understand the scope, what's being asked, the time frame when it's due, and if they do get in over their head and think it's going to take more time, coming back to the partner and talking about it," Johnson said.

Law firm recruiters and management consultants agreed that communication is often key to an associate's success. Major Lindsey & Africa's Michelle Fivel, for example, said she thinks it would behoove young lawyers to ask more questions about the bigger picture when they receive assignments so that they have an understanding of how they fit into the deals or cases on which they're working.

"Having that understanding enables them to do a good job on that assignment but also primes them for more responsibility on their next assignment," Fivel said.

Another important communication tip? Take criticism professionally and learn from it. When partners offer advice or criticism, fledgling attorneys need to be able to take that information and use it to their advantage rather than taking it personally, said Crowell & Moring chair Philip Inglima.

"Sometimes it can be hard for a fairly new lawyer to hear criticism from a mentor or any superior, and certainly from a client," Inglima said. "But lawyers who can take that in, accept it, and make judgments about how to improve and how to get better at both their craft and at their delivery of service to the client — that's just vital."

Young lawyers who surround themselves with people who can support them and help them course-correct and improve are the ones that will thrive professionally, Inglima said.

"No one springs from the head of Zeus as a fully formed lawyer. And anyone who thinks they're not going to have room for improvement at every level of their career is making the ultimate mistake," he said.

Recruiters tended to agree with that contention.

"Criticism is the best training tool there is, provided [it] is being given constructively towards a positive end goal," said Jeannie CaBell, senior attorney recruiter at Rifkin Consulting.

Above and beyond the day-to-day interactions, many law firm leaders said communication over the long term in order to maintain relationships is vital for attorneys, and those who fail to do it early on will likely soon regret it.

Not keeping in touch with people you've known throughout the years in order to build a strong network is "without a doubt" a massive mistake, according to Thompson & Knight LLP managing partner Mark Sloan.

"I think attorneys get too focused on getting to the work that's on their desk," Sloan said. "You have to keep in mind you want to have a long career, and to ultimately be as successful as you can be, you have to stay in touch with people from law school or other contacts you make in the community, and it takes years for these relationships to pay off."

A lot of times in BigLaw, young attorneys are handed work and loaded up with billable hours, but don't always have an easy way to build their own contacts and book of business, said Barnes & Thornburg LLP managing partner Robert Grand.

"It's a BigLaw environment where productivity is measured by billable hours, but you should take a little bit of time to develop relationships and look down the road at getting the relationship and developing business," Grand said. "If you look at the young lawyers you're working with at a company, 10 years from now, they might be the general counsel or assistant general counsel."

Chris Batz, a recruiter at Find the Lions, said you can't overstate the impact nurturing long-term relationships with industry colleagues could have on your legal career one day.

"Having a long-term mentality and approach to your career will pay dividends," Batz said. "If attorneys can see how a small investment of time over time will pay off, some may be more convinced of its fruit."

In addition to communication snafus, new attorneys also tend to make mistakes when it comes to crafting their career trajectories, according to law firm top brass.

Polsinelli PC CEO Chase Simmons said overspecialization is a big problem as well in large law firms where attorneys risk getting pigeonholed.

"To be a little bit more well-rounded and even as you are specializing, finding ways to respond as the market changes, as it always does, [is a good idea]," Simmons said. "Thinking that way [is preferable to] thinking that the thing you learned in your first three years is what you're going to be doing for 30 years."

Others said the speed bump in many young attorneys' career trajectories can come down to them taking ownership of their careers and work, proactively showing others that they are worthy of taking on more responsibility.

For Lewis Baach Kaufmann Middlemiss PLLC senior partner Eric Lewis, that means showing up in person for work as often as possible early on so that important learning experiences aren't missed when working remotely.

"I think the key thing for a young lawyer to do is to get involved in their cases and take responsibility in their cases, not just get an assignment by email and send it off by email," Lewis said. "I think you learn to be a lawyer from hanging around, from talking to people, from thinking about: 'How can I move my cases forward day to day?'"

Young attorneys need to take ownership of not only their assignments, but also their entire jobs and the clients they serve, according to Mintz managing partner Robert Bodian.

"I like to tell my young attorneys to think of a graph or line. On one end of it is 'indistinguishable' and on the other end is 'indispensable' and to try to move as close to indispensable as they can," Bodian said. "I think that takes owning the projects and not just doing a task and that's it."

--Editing by Rebecca Flanagan and Katherine Rautenberg.