

# FIRST YEAR ASSOCIATES

## Making good use of downtime

Associates between assignments can market themselves internally, do pro bono and join professional groups.

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**YOU ARE PREPARED.** You already know that sometime over the next year, your first year of practice, you will be extremely busy and are likely to work late hours. Your phone will ring too many times, your e-mail inbox will fill up rapidly and paper and books will grow into mountains on your desk, but this is not news to you. You have already spent some time considering how you will deal with the stress of work—massage, yoga or dinners out with friends or significant others.

What you may not have anticipated in considering your first year is how you will deal with the downtime that practice inevitably brings. Just as someone can assure you that you will be busy over the next year, rest assured that you will also have periods of downtime. After a trial, settlement or a closing, these respites are vital stages in most lawyers' practice cycles. But what should you do when your downtime goes from a few days to more than a week? How do you use the time effectively and, when you are in need of a new work assignment, how can you market yourself to partners and senior associates to get a new assignment? Just as partners and firms market themselves to develop new clients, junior associates may have to do the same when they are in need of new work.

You may need to "internally market" yourself to the senior lawyers within your firm. Keep in mind that the quality of your own work is your most valuable marketing tool. Literally every assignment you complete, from your role in a billion-dollar securities offering to a discrete 30-minute research project is a means to have work flow your way in the future. Senior lawyers will remember the quality of your work and, if they have some discretion vis-à-vis staffing on an upcoming assignment, they will come back to you if they liked your work. Senior lawyers in your firm are not unlike clients and by keeping them satisfied you can turn them into repeat customers of your skills and minimize your downtime.

If work does not come knocking on your door, then you may need to take a more proactive approach to finding your next assignment. Work assignments can flow in a variety of ways, and organizations have their own methods for assigning work to their junior associates. If you have worked well with a group of senior lawyers in the past, let them know you are not busy and are ready for a new assignment. These people know

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your work and they know you work well together.

Letting this group know you are available for a new assignment is like buying multiple tickets for the work assignment lottery. Your name might be drawn when the assigning attorney makes decisions regarding incoming work, but it might not. But if you've told a prior working group that you need work and someone from that group is assigned a new project, they may lobby to have you added to the team being assembled for that project.

These relationships are vital. People prefer to work with people they know and like. Use your stellar past work and

the positive working relationships that work has created to your advantage.

### The benefits of pro bono

If you have approached your colleagues and work remains slow in coming, you may want to consider taking on a pro bono matter. While a slowdown in the economy may affect, for example, the number of mergers and acquisitions deals your firm is negotiating, the number of clients in need of pro bono representation remains constant. We are bound by our code of ethics as attorneys to provide pro bono representation to people in need who cannot afford these services. Recognizing the importance of this duty, many law firms encourage jun-

ior associates to become involved in pro bono representation early on in their careers. Taking on a pro bono matter is an excellent way for a junior associate to get involved, and its benefits to both attorney and client are immeasurable.

Pro bono matters often allow junior associates the opportunity to take responsibility earlier than they would otherwise be able to on a typical assignment. Let's face it—most large law firms will not have a junior associate opportunity to stand up and argue in front of a judge in a complex litigation matter. However, in representing a pro bono client, you may have the opportunity to represent your client in actual court hearings, such as a guar-

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litem proceeding or an immigration hearing on behalf of an indigent client, in front of a judge or administrator. These experiences are an excellent way for junior associates to begin to build and develop their skills and to gain exposure to the types of negotiations and hearings that are part of our profession.

Most firms will pair junior associates with a more senior associate or a partner on a pro bono matter. This assignment may serve as an excellent opportunity for you to develop a strong relationship with a more senior attorney from another practice group within your firm, allowing you to solicit senior attorneys you might not otherwise have met for both additional pro bono matters and future billable work. It may also offer you the chance to work with lawyers in other departments who may share your interest, but whom you otherwise may not have the chance to get to know. You already know that internal networking can be invaluable to junior associates in need of new work. Pro bono work may provide you with the opportunity to expose your work and market yourself to a wider audience of senior lawyers, thereby leading potentially to greater and more challenging assignments.

A pro bono matter may also give you an opportunity you may otherwise not have to combine an interest outside of the office with billable legal work. The types of pro bono opportunities are virtually endless, and you may have the chance to combine your work with an issue you are truly passionate about. For example, if you are interested in the arts, you can work with local artists and musicians and assist them in reviewing and negotiating their contracts. An interest in immigration policy may lead you to take on the case of a person seeking political asylum. You can get involved in your

## Pro bono develops legal skills.

community by providing ongoing legal assistance to a local community-based organization that may be unable to retain full-time representation.

Most cities have organizations dedicated to assisting pro bono clients in finding representation and they are a great way to find out about pro bono opportunities. The chances are pretty good that if you have an interest, there is an organization or an individual out there looking for a good lawyer to assist or represent them on a pro bono basis.

### Professional organizations

Another opportunity to be proactive as a junior associate is to get involved early on in professional organizations. These organizations can provide you with an opportunity to develop knowledge of your practice area and meet other attorneys with similar interests. We all know that sometimes who you know is as important as what you know, and joining these types of organizations can provide you with the opportunity to create a network of people in your practice area that you may carry with you throughout your career.

Bar association committees are an excellent way to build relationships with other attorneys who share your interests and may be a great opportunity for networking. If you have an interest in anything from trade law to environmental

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law to the latest developments in Southeast Asia, chances are your local city or state bar association has a committee of similarly interested people.

These committees typically meet to discuss current legal, political, social and other issues affecting the particular practice area and may help you broaden your knowledge of that practice area. Often, the members of these committees come from firms, in-house positions, local and federal government organizations and nonprofits. Meeting lawyers in all lines of work and building a professional network within your practice area through these committees is an excellent resource to you as you become more senior and develop your practice.

By becoming involved and learning more about a particular area of the law, you may also have the opportunity to become the expert, your firm's go-to person on a particular type of deal or legal issue. Areas of the law that are rapidly changing and developing provide junior associates a little window to become experts right alongside the partners who have been practicing in that area for 20 years.

For example, as a first-year in a securities practice group, you will likely be less qualified to prepare a registration statement for an initial public offering than a senior associate or partner who has been doing it for ages. However, you do have the ability to learn about the recent Sarbanes-Oxley legislation by attending seminars or committee meetings and to know the effects of the legislation on future filings, at the same time and sometimes in greater depth than the busy partners and senior associates in your group. Having this information on hand and making yourself the expert in a particular area can provide you with an excellent opportunity to make yourself stand out as knowledgeable, resourceful and an essential part of the team.

Your first year of practice will be a full experience. You may become stressed, exasperated, challenged and even bored. When your reaction to downtime shifts from a profound sense of relief at having some time to catch your breath and clean up some loose ends on a completed assignment to an acute panic about having nothing to do, remember to be proactive. Downtime in practice is no different from downtime in other aspects of your life. It is vital, but there is such a thing as too much. Use the time to acquire new skills and to develop relationships that might bring future work your way. In doing so you will ensure that downtime is just one of the stages in your practice cycle and it will serve as just the respite you need until you impress everyone around you on your next assignment. ■