Good Things Come in Small Packages

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A great mentoring program is essential to any good law firm. Today's mentees are tomorrow's attorneys, and constitute the future of the firm. Firms of any size should provide a setting for training and professional growth for junior attorneys—but smaller firms may be better positioned to provide mentoring experiences that are meaningful to both mentor and mentee.

At large firms, mentoring opportunities are essentially built into the hierarchy; summer and junior associates are typically assigned to specific partners on designated assignments. While this provides associates with readily identifiable individuals to whom they can look for guidance, they may have less opportunity to meet their colleagues in other departments of the same firm. Often, the largest of firms are spread across different geographic regions and it may not be feasible to know everyone within the firm and across various specialties. Further, the scope of assignments may be limited in large firms: Junior and senior partners generally assume responsibility for major portions of the case, while associates perform more research-oriented or "behind-the-scenes" tasks.

While smaller firms may not have the same capacity for mentoring, the opportunities for professional growth and experience may be even more meaningful. First, mentees and associates can become familiar with diverse practice areas and with the specialties of firm members other than their assigned mentors. Due to the smaller base of operations, everyone quite literally gets to know everyone else. Even while working in a given legal specialty, associates have the chance to familiarize themselves with other areas of the law in a more holistic legal experience.

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Small firms also may be able to offer an "open-door" policy that makes senior attorneys more approachable. Junior attorneys can workshop a question, an approach to an assignment, a legal theory, or any other matter of concern informally through face-to-face discussion with senior members of the firm even if they are not assigned to each other.

This opportunity to bounce something off of a more experienced attorney informally is not only less intimidating but highly educational. Junior attorneys can ponder the issue and formulate their own sense of what solution might be best before asking more seasoned practitioners for confirmation. As senior attorneys, the authors have found that first asking the junior attorney, "What do you think?" can be very affirming: Mentees can offer their own thoughts about important aspects of the case and then seek guidance, rather than simply implementing strategies that have been handed down. Junior attorneys learn that their perspective is valued and to form their own judgments, rather than just relying upon the judgment of others, which also helps to build confidence.

On a more global scale, do you want to be in a small town or large city? Do you want to be downtown or in a suburb? This depends on who your target clients are and what they expect their lawyer's office to look like.

Financial

Get a tax ID for your business. It takes five minutes on irs.gov and is needed to open bank accounts.

You need three bank accounts. One firm operating account, one firm Interest on Lawyers Trust Account, and at least one personal account. Keep the funds separate from each other. The money in the IOLTA account is not yours until it is earned.

Consider a line of credit at your bank. Hopefully you have a relationship and a track record with a bank that knows you and will extend an unsecured line of credit.

Learn how to use accounting software, or use one of the many cloud-based practice management options that are available.

Learn to track your time on your computer.

Send your bills out the first of every month. Be consistent with this practice.

Consider taking credit cards. Make it easy for clients to pay for your services.

Get malpractice insurance. You need to have insurance to protect your assets. It is worth the peace of mind.

Other insurance. Health and business insurance. Think about your options. Take the time to shop your business to various vendors.

Technology

HARDWARE

Computer.

- Mac v. PC. I use Macs exclusively.
- Desktop v. laptop. A desktop is your basic workhorse and is cheaper than laptops. Laptops are mobile (of course). I have both.

Printer. Even with a paperless office you need a printer. I recommend a laser printer.

Scanner. You need one if you are going to go paperless, plus it is necessary for e-filing. I use the Fujitsu ScanSnap ix500, which works on PC or Mac.

Extra monitor. They are inexpensive and will give you lots of screen real estate.

External hard drive. Back up your computer. Use redundant systems backup systems, including cloud-based back-ups such as Backblaze and Crashplan. I have had a hard drive crash with all of my data, and I did not have it backed up. Imagine the distress.

Tablet. Good for reviewing deposition transcripts and marking on documents, but not a necessity.

SOFTWARE

Microsoft Office. Word is the most commonly used word processor out there, and Outlook, Excel, and PowerPoint are included.

Adobe Acrobat Professional. Acrobat is the gold standard. It helps you manage PDFs when you scan documents into your computer.

Timekeeping software. You can use cloud-based firm management software or buy a program for $50 once. I use OfficeTime.

Office management software. Options include Clio and Rocket Matter, which are good and getting better. They are overkill for a solo practitioner.

Calendar. There are many good calendars available that sync between all of your computers and devices. I recommend Fantastical 2.

To-do list. Again, many good ones out there. Get one that syncs between devices and computers so you only have to make one entry.

Accounting. I use QuickBooks, but there are others.

Email. Whatever you do, do not use Gmail as your primary office email client. Your Gmail is read by Google. They have said so. They have stated that you have no expectation of privacy if you use Gmail. I use Apple Mail and Outlook.

Cloud storage. Dropbox, Box, and others. It makes mobile lawyering possible. You may want to use encryption software as well.

Practice tips

Keep a regular schedule. Be at your desk by 8:30 am and available during working hours for clients to contact you.

Respond to all calls and emails within 24 hours. Even if you cannot give a response, let the sender know that you received their call/email and will get back to them. No one likes to be ignored.

Be courteous and professional with everyone. It will enhance your reputation.

Keep a healthy balance (whatever that means to you) between work and life. Work can swallow up your life as an entrepreneur. Spend time exercising and maintaining your health.

Be conversant with how to use technology. It is now an ethical duty to do so, and it will make you more efficient. ◆

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