



Top 10 Secrets of Success from an Associate

by John Mei, Covington &
Burling LLP

This practice note outlines 10 practical tips you can use as a summer associate to help you handle the next stage of your legal career: Becoming a full-fledged associate. You earned good grades in law school, did well in your interviews, and are on your way toward impressing your future colleagues as a summer associate. So far so good. Now you're wondering whether you have everything you need to step right into a permanent position once it is (you hope) offered to you. Starting off as an associate can be a challenging transition, but if you've made it this far, with the right attitude and a few secrets to success, you won't have anything to worry about. The following tips will help you seamlessly graduate from summer associate to associate.

1 Own your work product.

One thing partners say frequently is that they want associates who take ownership over their piece of the case or transaction. That means taking responsibility for every element of an assignment, taking the initiative to figure out what still needs to be done, and volunteering to the partner to do it without first being asked. Clients and partners have enough on their plates and don't relish having to manage their associates by constantly checking in and assigning every task that comes in. If there's an e-mail that no one has responded to, don't assume that someone else is handling it—check to see if it's something that you should be working on. Of course, a key part of that last sentence is "check to see." You should be taking initiative, but not freestyling on your own at this stage of your career.

2 Think big picture.

It can be easy to focus on your discrete assignment and lose track of the big picture. Take the time to understand the context of your case or transaction. Ask questions and figure out how your piece of the project fits in with the larger puzzle. Learn your client's business inside and out, your client's goals and motivations, and what keeps your client up at night. (Ask the partner whether that time is billable or whether you should record it under a business development number.) Understand the economics of your law firm or practice group, how partners generate and build business, the nitty-gritty of alternative fee arrangements and client pitches, and how you can assist in that process. Even as a junior associate, approach each assignment with the perspective of the partner or the client in mind.

3 Be patient.

Often in your legal career, someone—opposing counsel, your client, or one of your colleagues—will press you to send out a document before you've had a chance

to review it properly or secured sign-off from the appropriate parties. This is rarely a good idea, and you should never do it without checking with a senior lawyer at your firm first.

4 Learn to delegate.

Even when it might be faster and easier to perform a lower-level task yourself, consider whether it would be the most efficient use of your time and whether it would be an opportunity to train a junior associate on your team. If delegation makes sense, take the time to properly explain assignments—not just the "what," but also the "why"—and provide specific and practical feedback.

5 Be humble.

Even if you've worked on a given type of case or transaction a dozen times, there will be issues that hadn't previously come up, or perspectives that you haven't considered. Even when you think you know the answer, take the time to listen and think carefully before you respond. Understand your weaknesses as well as your strengths and don't be afraid to ask for help. Never stop learning from others. If you make a mistake, don't be defensive or point fingers at others, and certainly don't be tempted to ignore or hide it. Disclose it to others on your team, be accountable, and treat it as a learning experience.

6 Build strong relationships with everyone you encounter in your work.

A large part of being a successful associate involves building strong and lasting relationships. Earn the trust of your colleagues and clients by consistently producing excellent work product, hitting deadlines, anticipating their needs, and going above and beyond. Take the initiative to find formal and informal mentors who will be valuable sources of advice and guidance as your career progresses. But also get to know and support

your fellow associates. Treat everyone you interact with—opposing counsel, more junior associates, paralegals, administrative assistants, other support staff, outside vendors, and clerks—with kindness and respect. Build and maintain those relationships as you will need to draw on them over and over again. Having a strong support system is crucial.

7 Don't be afraid to say no to an assignment.

Being enthusiastic is an important part of being a successful associate. But be wary of committing to too much. Projects can grow or shrink at a moment's notice. Taking on more than you can reasonably handle and dropping the ball on an assignment is an easy way to ruin your hard-earned reputation. Partners won't remember associates who declined assignments because they were too busy. But they will remember an associate who blew an assignment that resulted in a stern lecture from a client. Communication is key—if you're juggling multiple projects that become unmanageable, speak up sooner rather than later and help to figure out a solution. We've all been there, and it's more important to identify and resolve potential issues early than it is to try to maintain the illusion that everything is under control when it isn't.

8 Take personal time.

Many associates with star-level potential neglect to find balance in their lives and end up burning out early. It's a marathon, not a sprint, and sustainability is important. Take vacations and to the extent possible, really get away from the office. Unless you are in a true crunch time, set aside time during the week to spend with family or otherwise recharge. So long as you communicate your availability to your colleagues, are mindful of your workflow, and are efficient when you are on the clock, you can be a successful associate and still maintain a reasonable work-life balance.

9 Focus on professional development.

Even in the midst of demanding client work, time spent on professional development is a necessary investment in your future. Take time for professional reading—subscribe to newsletters on areas of interest and keep up with the latest news and developments in your practice area. Attend lectures and seminars both within your firm and externally. Approach skill development in a structured manner by figuring out and filling in the gaps in your experience. Stay in touch with friends and former classmates, foster a rapport with your clients, and spend time with your colleagues in informal settings to get to know them both personally and professionally.

10 Find joy in your work.

Partners and clients are where they are because they love what they do, and they enjoy working with others who feel the same way. Find the parts of a project that make you enthusiastic and excited, focus on those elements, and find ways to convey that energy. Take pride in your work product, no matter how small a part of the project it might seem. Believe it or not, there are ways that you can craft a cover e-mail, signature page packet, or file memo that truly represent excellence. Strive to do your best work at all times and take satisfaction from doing so.



COVINGTON

John Mei **Associate, Covington & Burling LLP**

John Mei is a member of the firm's Corporate Practice Group and focuses on securities and capital markets, mergers and acquisitions, and finance transactions. His experience includes representing U.S. and international clients in a range of equity and debt offerings; public and private mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures; and secured and unsecured loan transactions. He also advises clients in connection with corporate governance and general corporate matters.