



PAULA TSURUTANI

Freelance Writer and Editor

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Back to Basics

There are some skills law graduates don't learn in school, but you can help fill the gaps.

According to an ABA report, more than 34,000 law students graduated in 2018 — most finding jobs in law firms. After spending several years in school, a considerable chunk of money and many hours studying and stressing, new hires face additional challenges when transitioning from law student to lawyer.

Thinking about legal problems in a practical and strategic way is one such challenge.

“Many young attorneys focus just on the law — what the cases hold, what the statute says. But law isn’t applied in a vacuum,” says M. Cabell Clay, a Member of the labor and employment group at Moore & Van Allen PLLC. “To provide effective counsel, you need to understand a client’s business and its goals. That’s as important as knowing the law.”

Being results-oriented is key. “Clients want quality legal work that helps accomplish their goals,” says David Luikart, Hiring Shareholder at Hill Ward Henderson. “And they can refuse to pay — or fire us — if we fall short. We get hired to deliver tangible results to clients, not great ideas or interesting theories.”

Law schools can help the transition by incorporating practical courses as part of their curriculum. For example, a law school course on accounting for lawyers would be invaluable.

“At a macro level, students need to be taught how businesses run and how their work impacts the businesses’ clients,” says Corinne Cantwell Heggie, a Partner at the Wochner Law Firm.

That means knowing how to read and understand balance sheets, income statements, how businesses are valued, and measurements of growth and profitability, says Luikart. “Most of our clients are either businesses or businesspeople, and we need to understand their businesses to help them.”

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“It’s critical that students learn how to appropriately correspond over email, internally and externally, in a manner that reflects service and professionalism to clients,” says Heggie. And doing so generates other career-enhancing benefits for new lawyers — it makes their superiors look good, can help generate more business and can help advance a new lawyer’s career.

A WORTHWHILE PARTNERSHIP: LAW FIRMS AND LAW SCHOOLS

Partnering with law schools is one way firms can prepare students for the rigors of law firm life. “Firms should coordinate with their alumni associations and local bar associations to host practical seminars,” says John C. Trimble, a Senior Partner in the Indianapolis firm of Lewis Wagner, LLP. He suggests topics like how to be a good law firm associate; how to develop new business and what you should know now; and becoming a partner: the hows and whys.

One law school is working hard to help law students navigate the realities of private practice. At the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, students can take advantage of an externship program to gain practical experience and skills. Kristen Uhl Hulse, Assistant Professor of the Practice of Law, applies her background as a transactional attorney and law firm professional development leader in guiding students through law firm and corporate placements.

The school vets externship supervisors — often alumni — at law firms that range in size from solo to Am Law 100. These supervisors then work with students, providing hands-on learning opportunities, assessing and reviewing assignments, and offering feedback and evaluation. The program is similar to an apprenticeship and closely approximates the law firm experience, equipping students with practical skills and bringing their classroom learning into context, says Hulse.

Externships are a win-win: law students gain work experience, and law firms gain a source for new recruits. Hulse estimates that 20% of Sturm College of Law’s graduates find jobs through this program.

LEARNING OUTSIDE OF LAW SCHOOL

Some of the most useful education happens outside of law school, and that can give law students a competitive edge. Business development, for example, is an essential law firm skill but rarely taught in law schools. Involvement with bar associations, student government and related extracurricular activities gives law students needed experience. Heggie notes that the Women’s Bar Association of Illinois, where she serves as Immediate Past President, offers law students free memberships and hires women law student externs.

Trimble says that many new lawyers are not strategic about their career or the need to build networks of business contacts in the community to help grow their practice.

“While in law school, students must get involved in the local bar association or the school bar association. These activities help build social intelligence and interpersonal skills — essential for building relationships and a book of business,” he says. Firms also can help new lawyers refine these skills by supporting bar association participation.

TIPS FOR WOMEN AND DIVERSE NEW LAWYERS

Despite steady advances, new lawyers who are women and people of color still face obstacles, forcing them to be cognizant of their “otherness.”

“I’m not sure how many students realize that the number of women who rise to the equity partnership or C-suite level is still incredibly low,” says Nicole Little, a Partner at Fitch, Even, Tabin & Flannery LLP. “I am often the only woman in the courtroom. More than once I’ve been mistaken as the court reporter. It’s not always easy.”

Shannon M. Nessier, a Litigation Partner at Hanson Bridgett LLP, says that while you need to be prepared for microaggressions, it’s also important to know your value. “Clients want diverse

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outside counsel. Know that your firm capitalizes on your diversity in client pitches and RFPs. So lean in. Make it known that you know you have a value add. Do it in whatever way makes you most comfortable. But own it.”

And, just as important, says Little: “Remember that by pushing forward, and up, you’re creating a path that is making it easier for those following behind you. So lift as you climb.”

A formal or informal sponsorship program that helps navigate a firm’s culture — critical for all new lawyers — is especially important for those who are historically underrepresented.

“Sponsorship is not mentorship,” says Yusuf Zakir, Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Holland & Knight. “It’s a more involved, engaged and proactive relationship where the sponsor actively invests in the success of their protégé, facilitates their growth and development, and encourages the protégé to seek stretch and growth opportunities, including higher-profile and higher-risk work.”

He says for women and diverse new lawyers, a sponsor can be a great champion to help their protégé grow and ensure that any mistakes made are not unduly amplified. “After all, no person has been successful without failure or mistakes.”

HOW LEGAL MANAGERS CAN HELP

New lawyers comprise a major investment. In fact, firms spend an average of \$12,000 on recruiting and training attorneys, and large firms spend an average of \$62,000 a year, according to a 2017 survey by Robert Half Legal. So it’s no surprise that firms want new hires to hit the ground running. Having a formal onboarding process that involves the entire administrative team is an essential first step.

“Administrators must play a role to ensure the most efficient lawyer training,” says Nessier. “If administrators help address the business aspects of the firm, the billing lawyers can focus more of their time and energy on the substantive side. When billing lawyers have sole responsibility for both business and substantive



training, two things can happen: the lawyer spends too much time training and not enough time on legal work or client service. Or the lawyer just dabbles at mentoring the new lawyer.”

In particular, new lawyers need to understand and respect the economics of their law firms — including their billing rates, paralegal rates and client research costs. “Understanding firm economics can help young lawyers develop other prudent skills — timely, accurate timekeeping, with clear descriptions that convey the value of the work performed,” says Clay.

During onboarding at Luikart’s firm, legal managers make a point of introducing new lawyers to the business side of the firm. “They learn how an assignment becomes a dollar — helping them understand billing, accounts receivable, how to collect without alienating a client, and when to fire a client.”

Firms also can take a step back and reassess the way they view new lawyers and how they approach training. Rather than focusing on a specific course or generational behavior, firms need to “look at the individuals they hire and what each one needs to thrive,” says Nessier. “If a firm doesn’t do that, they will never get the best out of their people.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Tsurutani is a senior-level strategic communications writer and editor who works with organizations in the legal profession, the arts and higher education.

 ptsurutani@gmail.com

 linkedin.com/in/paulatsurutani