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# Creating Learning Opportunities From Everyday Assignments

Young attorneys need to be adaptable to working in an environment that emphasizes self-directed learning rather than the curriculum-based structure of law school.

By **Garrett Field** | May 06, 2020 at 01:56 PM

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**Garrett Field of Goldberg, Miller and Rubin. (Photo: Courtesy Photo)**

One thing that many recently employed graduates and newly admitted lawyers struggle with is how to get the most out of every assignment or task. There are a variety of reasons for this. One main contributor is that a majority of law school assignments are designed with a different purpose

and different factors in mind than most forms of actual legal practice. Young attorneys need to be adaptable to working in an environment that emphasizes self-directed learning rather than the curriculum-based structure of law school. Additionally, young attorneys can get caught in a mindset of finishing assignments and projects as quickly as possible without really taking the time to pause and think about how they are improving as an attorney. Overall, this mindset can cause young attorneys to produce mediocre work product in the long term, stunting their career growth.

To combat this, young lawyers need to utilize reflective learning while working on their assigned tasks. Reflective learning is the conscious process of analyzing what one has done or is doing and translating that experiential knowledge to future practice. It enables one to learn from a wide range of situations, apply new information in a broad context and develop professionally. This process is critical to all attorneys, but especially young attorneys who lack years of experience in certain key aspects of practicing law.

Young attorneys need to understand the big picture of a case and see how each assignment fits into it. Understanding this allows them to think critically about the matter as they conduct legal research, and helps them comprehend the reasoning behind filing certain documents. Instead of jumping into a task the moment it is assigned, young lawyers should take a minute to think about why the assignment is being given to them to understand the overall strategy for the case. Questions like, "Why would we file a motion here?" or "Why would we send a letter here instead of calling another attorney?" can provide the young attorney with valuable insight into how that specific assignment fits into the case as a whole.

If a new lawyer, for example, was told to review prior deposition transcripts, instead of only taking notes on the deposition testimony, they could pause and think about who was deposed and why an attorney would want to depose that specific witness. Thinking about each question asked at the deposition and how the attorney who took the deposition used these questions to gather the necessary evidence, is a critical learning experience for new attorneys if they take advantage of the opportunity.

Additionally, young lawyers can also begin to think about how they would strategize and possibly tweak the assignment in the future while they are completing the task. Going back to the deposition example, young attorneys could ask, "Would I ask the same questions at this deposition?" or "What critical information was the attorney taking the deposition trying to prompt from the witness?" This type of reflection allows new attorneys to create a personal professional communication style.

While communicating early on, some new lawyers struggle with learning to avoid redundancy, as well as knowing how to strike appropriate tones with specific audiences. By carefully thinking through assignments while they are working on them and thinking about how senior attorneys asked them to

draft assignments, a young attorney can begin to get a sense of how and when to use certain writing styles. It is a matter of knowing your recipient and adjusting accordingly.

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Whether it is drafting a letter to opposing counsel or writing a report on an important matter to a client, young lawyers need to ascertain which tone is appropriate for which recipient. Sometimes the context of an assignment can assist in identifying the correct style: Emails, for instance, usually are less formal than letters or faxes. Focusing on context helps the young lawyer develop their own voice and think about how they would handle similar communications in the future.

Young lawyers also need to thoughtfully reflect on their previous work product from the perspective of their employer. This reflection means honestly identifying strengths and weaknesses while noting areas for improvement. When given edits, instead of just making the corrections as fast as possible, a young attorney should try to understand why they are making these changes. Understanding the reason behind the revisions allows them to produce better work in the future. The young lawyer should also address areas that they might have struggled with during their completion of the task and why they think they experienced those issues. Finding solutions to these questions can help them avoid the same mistakes in the future and make noticeable strides in their professional development.

Overall, it can be quite challenging for some lawyers to find meaningful learning experiences early on in their legal practice. It is critical, however, for young lawyers to gain as much knowledge as possible from every task.

By following the tips outlined above, young lawyers can develop skills and habits that will make them better attorneys for years to come, all while succeeding in their everyday assignments.

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