

HOW TO BUILD A MEANINGFUL LEGAL CAREER

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There's no simple formula. It takes hard work and a lot of soul searching



Study hard. Go to law school. Find a job on Bay Street. Work hard. Make partner. Sounds like a straight enough path, right?

Not so fast. The reality is that, just like life, your legal career will take you on lots of twists and turns before you arrive at your destination. But even if there's no straightforward route, there are similar challenges that all lawyers have to face. Here are five of the most important things you can do, once you become a lawyer, to get your career moving in the right direction.

1. FIND YOUR FIT.

Vaguely defined, "fit" refers to a firm's environment and whether a candidate will click. The term is thrown around with reckless abandon during recruitment. By now, you have likely heard it more times than you ever would have cared to.

On one hand, this is problematic. Firms often invoke “fit” when they want to hire lawyers who look and think just like them, often to the detriment of women and racialized members of the profession. But when you’re deciding where to work, you should consider the firm’s culture and the personalities of the lawyers you will be working with. After all, you will probably spend more time there than anywhere else.

If you’re an introverted person, for example, you may not be happy at a firm where there are expectations that you attend regular networking events and professional functions. And if you care about work-life balance, you may not enjoy working in an environment where you are expected to be on-call 24/7. In short, not every firm will be a good “fit” for you. So think about this early on in your career.

Don’t be discouraged if you fail to find your “fit” right off the bat or if it changes over time. There are lots of options. But remember: you don’t have to settle for a work environment that you don’t enjoy.

2. DEVELOP YOUR SKILLS.

One of the most important aspects of your practice will be your technical legal skills. You will be told that, in order to acquire a legal skillset, you will need to work hard in your first few years of practice to learn the black-letter law and day-to-day procedures or nuances of your practice area.

But what does “work hard” mean? The answer is different for everyone. So we suggest that you talk to the partners you work with to understand their expectations. (You might be surprised by their answers). Find good mentors and learn from their experiences. And complete your work to the best of your ability. This will make you successful over the long term.

Most importantly, fight the urge to compare yourself to your colleagues. If you fall into this trap, you’ll start to think you have to out-docket and out-network everyone to find success. That type of behaviour is unsustainable and will lead to burnout. And remember: even lawyers who bill 2,000 hours a year can feel like they should be working harder.

3. BUILD A CLIENT ROSTER.

Practising law is about more than providing legal advice. You will also need to build a good reputation and bring in business.

When you have to start building a book of business — and how you go about it — depends on where you work. At a large Bay Street firm, for example, you will likely spend the first few years of practice

building an internal profile. Only senior associates are expected to engage in external business development. If you're a sole practitioner, however, you'll have to land clients on day one.

Our advice is to start small. Try joining local legal organizations — like your province's bar association — or get involved with community initiatives you enjoy.

4. DEFINE YOUR OWN VERSION OF SUCCESS.

Despite what we hear during the recruitment process, working on Bay Street is not the only way to succeed. The authors of this article illustrate this point. We work at a Bay Street firm, a litigation boutique and a mid-size full-service firm. The bottom line is: success is personal.

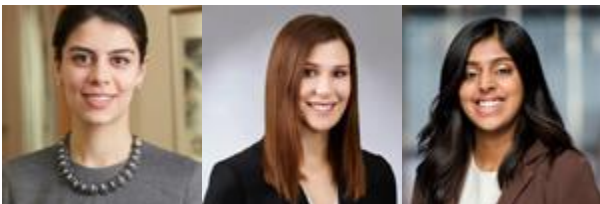
Take time to think about what you value in your life and what “success” means to you. Do you want to make partner on Bay Street? Do you want to run your own practice? Would you rather work part-time while still following other passions? Do you want to take on important, meaningful cases that help the community?

Your answers to these questions may change over time. But no matter what, don't let others people's ideas and expectations define success for you.

5. FOLLOW YOUR PATH TO POWER.

Most partners and senior lawyers will tell you that their success is the result of hard work and good luck. What they won't always tell you is that success is also a result of thoughtful and intentional planning. After you've identified what “success” means to you, plan out how you can get there. Take a look at the LinkedIn or the online profiles of lawyers in your firm, or lawyers in the profession that you admire. What have they done? What can you do to chart a similar course?

Engage with these issues early in your career. Have a positive attitude and good luck.



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