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Don't Wait for Opportunities to Find You

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Special to the Legal

The initial weeks of an attorney's first job out of law school are filled with excitement and optimism. Finally embarking on your chosen career after seven years of school and a long summer spent studying for the bar exam is exhilarating. But as fall fades into winter and you become more familiar with your new colleagues and the tasks that now occupy your days, it can be easy for some of your initial enthusiasm to wane. At that point it is critical to recognize the opportunities in even the most basic tasks you are assigned to and seize them.

Importantly, all of the work you do during your first year is a chance to build your reputation within your new firm. If you previously summered at your firm, you will likely be working with a larger group of attorneys and will certainly be working on longer projects. If you did not summer at your firm, this will be the first time your new colleagues will have the



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opportunity to interact with you outside of the interview context. Partners and senior attorneys want to work with associates who are not only talented, but also are easy to work with and enthusiastic. Approaching each of the projects you work on in your first year, no matter how small or unimportant you may think they are, with a critical eye to how the work you are doing fits more broadly into the case or deal and your firm's ongoing relationship with the client can help ensure that you are someone others want to continue working with. This becomes increasingly important as you become more senior and can no longer rely on the sort of centralized assignment processes that many firms use to distribute work to junior associates.

The reputation and personal brand you build through your work

product and attitude early in your career will also stay with you throughout your time at your firm and beyond. The reality is that many attorneys do not remain at the same firm for their entire career. You should never pass up the opportunity to create a positive impression on the people you work with in your first year, as some of them may become your future clients or contacts if you decide to move to another firm or go in-house.

Perhaps more importantly, any assignment you are given has the potential to grow beyond what you were originally asked to do, but only if you allow that to happen. The projects you are staffed on as a new associate may seem unglamorous and, after a while, can feel mundane and repetitive. But these projects are some of the best ways for a first-year associate to become indispensable on cases.

For example, new associates are often tasked with digging through mountains of data as part of document review or due diligence. It is easy to see your work on these

projects as an annoying rite of passage on your way to more exciting work like preparing for depositions or interacting with clients. But simply trying to get through your quota of daily pages to be reviewed is more than just a disservice to clients—it misses one of the best opportunities available to new associates.

While cases are ultimately won in the courtroom or at the negotiating table and deals are finalized at closing, these matters can't make it to resolution unless the lawyers involved have an in-depth understanding of the basis of each case or deal, which is where new associates fit in. On most cases and deals, partners and senior associates will not be looking at the vast troves of company documents that need to be reviewed, despite the fact that they need someone who understands these documents and how they fit into the case or deal at hand. A new associate who has spent the time to review the company's documents with a critical eye can provide exactly that.

During my first year at Dechert I was assigned to a large document review. I was one of several junior associates tasked with helping prepare for a senior corporate executive's deposition by reviewing thousands of documents produced as part of his custodial file. In

addition to emails and memos, the documents we reviewed included long, technical documents dealing with complicated areas of science with which I have no familiarity. The volume of tedious documents that needed to be reviewed, and reviewed quickly, as well as the fact that this was occurring in the middle of a beautiful summer in Philadelphia, made it very tempting to quickly plow through the documents looking only for the key issues that we had been alerted to by the more senior lawyers on the case. Fortunately, my curiosity got the better of me and I became familiar with the witness and the work he did for the company, as well as with the larger issues of the case.

As our team started meeting to prepare for the upcoming deposition, the information I learned from spending time going through the witness' file allowed me to answer questions that no one else could. Buoyed by feeling like I was a contributing member of the team, I continued to put more energy and time into the review project and became the go-to person on our team when fact-specific issues arose. After several weeks on this project, it was finally time to meet with the client and the witness to start preparing for his deposition. The partners on the

case agreed that I was the right associate to attend these meetings and ultimately help defend the deposition because of what I learned from the document review, even though there were more senior associates on the case who had far more deposition experience than I did.

There have been plenty of other document reviews that I worked on that did not end with an experience as exciting as that one. But that experience did illuminate for me the importance of putting yourself in a position to find opportunities in all the work that you do, rather than waiting for opportunities to find you. Everything you do as a first-year can help create your reputation within your firm and has the potential to lead to an amazing experience, provided you let it. •