

Surviving Your First Year in PRACTICE

This supplement highlights some realities about being a freshly called lawyer. Being one is not as glamorous as shows like *The Practice* depict lawyering to be. These dramas are far removed from the realities of day-to-day practice as a lawyer. Below are some tips to surviving your first year in practice.

How to Manage Your Supervising Lawyer's Expectations

Do not create unrealistic and unsustainable expectations.

If you receive a new task, ask when the work needs to be completed, and if you are unable to complete the task within the internal deadline given because you do not have the capacity, for example, you must communicate this, and in appropriate circumstances, politely and tactfully ask for an extended deadline. Do not take on tasks unless you have the capacity to complete them, otherwise your supervising lawyer will be labouring under the impression that the internal deadline can be met, only to be told a day before that you are actually not able to meet it.

If you receive a difficult task which you think you need guidance on, ask your supervising lawyer, otherwise he or she might think that you are well-equipped to complete the task. Do not procrastinate and delay starting on the task because it seems difficult. The longer you avoid a task, the more difficult it will be to address as the days and weeks pass, causing you more stress and more delay, until the situation snowballs to a point where it seems impossible for you to remedy. Always be proactive and show initiative at work. Always ask yourself what needs to be followed-up on, even after a task has been completed.





How to Manage Difficult Colleagues

In the course of your professional life, you are more than likely to encounter a difficult colleague. Difficult work ethics and a jumble of different personalities can create problems. He or she may be one who does not take ownership for a mistake made, constantly looks into your in-tray and prioritises work for you, or one who does not stand up and be counted on when it really matters.

Always remain courteous to a difficult colleague no matter how easy or tempting it is not to be. Talk to them about the issue instead of about them, to deal with a conflict. Group dynamics, timing, tact and keeping distance will always have their place in dealing with conflicts. It would also be helpful if you keep the facts in focus, and not be blindsided by emotions.

If you wish to make a point, do it factually, politely and directly. Never pen lengthy

and incessant e-mails to a colleague to make a point or even worse, to vent frustration, when the point can easily be made with the person directly. If you receive an abusive e-mail, never react to it by penning an equally abusive reply. Think twice before you click that “send” button. Be flexible, be tolerant, and learn to work together to get the job done.

How to Navigate Workplace Politics

Being respectful and trustworthy goes a long way at the office. Never start a gossip, and if you hear them, you have a choice to never repeat them. Gossip has a bad habit of introducing inaccurate variations to the information obtained. By choosing to separate yourself from workplace politics, you set yourself apart as a person who can work well with other people at the office. Get on with work with minimal fuss and go home to your friends and family.

The Billable Target

All law firms, just like any other corporations, seek profits. They are not “not-for-profit” organisations. Every firm would invariably have expectations as regards billing targets and you are advised to speak to your supervising lawyer to learn more about yours. Most if not all lawyers will have a billable target of between five and eight hours a day. Every day you will have to record and account for your time spent in office and/or at Court either manually on a timesheet provided by your firm, or electronically through a time tracking program in your workstation.

As a junior lawyer, you will come to realise that there is a gulf between the billable target hours for each day, and the hours you actually spend at work. For example, if you had spent two hours on a task, you may only be able to bill for one, ie your time is being written off. This is because as a junior lawyer, you are constantly learning and you may actually require a longer time

(as compared to your supervising lawyer) to complete what may be regarded as a straightforward task. Hence, the time you spend on the task may be regarded as excessive, and so, you may not be able to bill for actual time spent. This would mean that to achieve a billable target of eight hours a day, it is likely that you have to be in the office much longer.

To achieve your billable target hours, it also presupposes that you are given a number of tasks and assigned a number of files sufficient for you to work on, to meet the billable target hours every day. Sometimes, you might get “small” files which you would be unable to derive much billing from. Other times, you might notice that the seemingly “bigger” or “larger” files seem to pass you by, and so, you have got to ask yourself why.

You must practise honestly and ethically, and not record for a minute more for time which you have not spent on a matter.

How to Have Some Semblance of Work-life Balance

While you want to impress your supervising lawyer, do not be a Man of Steel and work around the clock. You are not invincible

like superman. You will grow tired in the long-term and put your health at risk. No one other than your friends and family will be more affected if you are struck down by illness. Take regular breaks.

How to Manage Your Client

As a junior lawyer, your supervising lawyer is more likely to communicate directly with the client. In those instances that you do, however, you should look out for yourself and ensure that your discussion or communication with the client is always properly recorded in an attendance memo, or followed-up in writing by letter or e-mail, whichever is appropriate in the circumstances. You will invariably be asked to meet client’s deadlines at short notice but do not promise what you cannot deliver, and communicate clearly what you can and what you cannot do. It is always better to set the bar low and exceed that bar. When in doubt, always ask and work closely with your supervising lawyer.

Communication with Fellow Advocates and Solicitors

Always remain unfailingly courteous to your fellow advocate and solicitor. When communicating, the advocate and

solicitor should not write offensive or threatening letters, which may amount to unprofessional conduct. Similarly, you should not in the heat of an argument hang up the phone abruptly on a fellow advocate and solicitor, which is contrary to simple courtesies.

Conclusion

This short article is by no means an exhaustive list of dos and don’ts in private practice. In particular, if you are interested to find out more about the principles governing the relationship between the advocate and solicitor and the client, and the relationship between advocates and solicitors, a comprehensive account is found in the book, *Ethics and Professional Responsibility: A Code for the Advocate and Solicitor* by Professor Jeffrey Pinsler, SC, which reminds us of the unstinting ethical standards that are to be expected of members of the legal profession, which I have personally found helpful.

Congratulations on your admission as advocates and solicitors of the Supreme Court of Singapore.

John Lim

