



By Christina Galarza

My First 100 Days in Office

Starting at a law firm is scary. You begin to realize that maybe you're not as well prepared as you thought you'd be at this point of your career. But, the truth is, if you're sitting at a desk after being offered a job, you are qualified and capable of taking on this new challenge. Now that I've completed my first 100 days, these are the tips I would've given myself on day one:

It's OK to ask questions!

This may seem cliché, but it's been the most helpful habit I've developed. When I first started as an associate, I didn't want to come off as clueless, so I attempted to understand matters that attorneys with years of experience wouldn't understand. It didn't take long to realize that I had to start asking questions if I wanted my assignments to be complete and accurate. An associate being able to understand an assignment is just as important to the associate as it is to the attorney delegating the task.

Pick up the phone.

Another great source of information is sitting on your desk—the phone. One of our clients was injured in the Hoboken train crash. I was tasked with preparing the notice of claim, with the instruction to identify every address for service. I was frustrated when an hour of research resulted in different answers. I eventually decided to do something out of the ordinary—I picked up the phone and called NJ Transit. Within minutes the person on the phone confirmed which address was the correct one. It

quickly became apparent that I could use my time more wisely if I contacted the company or government office directly. Even if the person on the other end of the call didn't know the answer, they would often direct me to a person who did. As obvious as it sounds, the best way to get a question answered is by asking.

Paralegals can be your lifeline.

When I first started, I felt as though the paralegal knew more than I did, and that's because she did. Even if you had worked as a paralegal in the past, you most likely weren't a paralegal at your current law firm. This means the paralegal understands the firm's filing system, the facts of cases, and possibly the court in that county better than you. He or she may not know what *res ipsa loquitor* is, but he or she can find files, submit motions to the court and schedule faster than you can, at least in your first 100 days. Be kind to your paralegal; he or she can be your greatest guide.

It's all been done before.

While three years of legal education has taught me a lot, it never taught me how to write and file a complaint or draft a motion in New Jersey. Every case is different, but it is likely that there is already a format you can use as a starting point. Finding cases with similar fact patterns is equivalent to finding a gold mine. Use older complaints and motions as a skeleton to help you create new ones for your case. This will not only save time, but will help you create these documents in the format your firm is used to.

**Ask to go to court.**

While all law firms are different, if your firm allows you to go to court I'd strongly suggest attending, especially if it's a case you've done some work on. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to draft a motion and watch a partner argue and win the motion in court. It helps build confidence to see that your work has a real impact. You also get the opportunity to observe different lawyering tactics. In one case, I witnessed an attorney turn red with fury, yell and attempt to destroy the character of our client in just the opening statement. The judge reprimanded him, and even pulled the attorneys to her chamber to speak with him. Outside of the courtroom, and when discussing a settlement, I couldn't believe he was the same man. He was kind, genuine and calm.

As previously stated, while every law firm is different, these tips can help any associate during his or her first year of legal practice. I've been lucky enough to join a firm that encourages learning and made my first 100 days enjoyable.

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