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SUSAN SALTONSTALL DUNCAN ■ TIPS & TACTICS FOR NEW LAWYERS

Technically Speaking: Develop Your Skills

Nearly every senior lawyer will say you should devote the first years in practice to becoming the best lawyer you can be. While many factors contribute to long-term success, becoming a technically proficient lawyer is an absolute must. Law school may have provided a foundation in legal principles, but you must now apply theory to practice and expand your working knowledge.

Master the substantives. Get to know the area of law in which you're working. Read and track relevant articles and cases, and attend the right CLE courses. The sooner you understand the applicable law, the more competent—and confident—you'll be.

Understand your assignments. Be certain you receive (and agree on) specific instructions from the supervising lawyer about parameters, time to spend, deadlines, next steps and client expectations. Collect and organize all materials related to the case. Research and understand the facts and details of your project.

Clarify the objectives. If you're working directly with clients, ask them what they want to accomplish. It's easy to make assumptions and deliver something that the client does not really need. Ask about immediate and longer-term objectives, and how or why things evolved to this point. Then offer alternative solutions so clients can select a strategy that best fits their needs. If you're not

working with the client, ask these same questions of your supervising lawyer.

Understand the context. You must also take into account the context within which the client operates. This means understanding the client's personal and business goals and concerns; organization, culture and financial operations; risks and limitations; and internal and external trends affecting the client. It also requires understanding the nature of the client's relationship with your firm.

Concentrate on quality. Deliver work products that are well written, grammatically correct and *accurate*. Check everything several times. Go to original sources to confirm current statutes. Don't rely on spell-check. Develop a system with your secretary or a paralegal, facilitating double-proofreading for typos, formatting and accuracy of facts.

Learn as You Go

It takes time and practice to convert legal knowledge into excellent legal work. Use your first years in the law to absorb as much as you can by observing those who are really good at it, and by taking advantage of the range of resources. And be sure to learn from your own successes and failures along the way. ■



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Checklist

How to Become an Excellent Technical Lawyer

- Never make assumptions about assignments, client expectations or strategies. Get clarification and confirmation on all that you do.
- Jump in and learn everything you can about an area of law, a case you're involved in or a client with whom you may work. While up-front research may not be billable, it will be valuable.
- When you're assigned to a matter, review similar cases and files and research precedents. Talk to others with experience working on analogous cases.
- Remember that everything you present and produce—from oral status reports and e-mails, to internal memos and document drafts—reflects your competency and thoroughness. Never send anything without being certain that others will think highly of your work product.
- Ask supervising lawyers for feedback on your oral skills, written work products and legal approaches. Get specifics on what you did well and not so well.
- Use and improve your judgment. It is a vital and highly valued skill in your profession.