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SUSAN SALTONSTALL DUNCAN • TIPS & TACTICS FOR NEW LAWYERS

Focus on What Clients Say and Do

In the rush of getting work done, it's easy to forget what the goal of your task is: to respond to a need or help solve a problem for your client. Associates typically serve *two* kinds of clients. You have internal clients, including the supervising lawyers who delegate and oversee projects; and external clients, who retain and compensate the firm for legal services. In both cases, your approach to nurturing the relationship should be similar.

Understand the client and the assignment. First, make certain you understand the client and what's expected of you. Ask questions about how this matter fits into the overall picture for the client—for example, what's the client's history with this issue or opportunity? How much time should you spend on the matter, what's the desired end product, and when are the critical dates?

Get to know your supervisors. Your internal clients will be evaluating your performance and progress. Ask them periodically how you're doing and whether they have suggestions for improvement. Nurture the relationship outside the context of the case.

Get to know external clients. Similarly, when you interact with external clients, be sure to show interest in their satisfaction with the way you're handling their matters. Try to get to know them beyond your discussions about the case. Inquire about their business, what future needs they might have, their goals and interests and, when appropriate, their personal background.

Appreciate clients' value. Clients offer a great deal of value beyond providing revenue to you and your firm. It is through the client's eyes that you can learn what you need to know to be a better lawyer, strengthen the relationship and expand work from this client and others. Seek input from clients on their resources and market trends—for example, who else they receive professional services from, where their industry is headed, what business publications they read and what conferences they attend.

Add value. You make yourself more indispensable to clients by adding value to the working relationship. Be proactive by tracking trends, checking clients' Web sites regularly, and bringing their attention to relevant threats or opportunities. Introduce clients to others you know who could help your clients in some way.

Good client relationships still boil down to effective communication, trust, responsiveness and results. In the rush of your to-dos, take time to ask good questions and to use what you hear and learn to enhance your client relationships. LP

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Checklist

Steps to Strengthen Client Relationships

- ☐ Be accessible and responsive. Return phone calls and e-mails within two hours if possible, but within the same day is a must. If you're out of town or tied up in a meeting, make sure clients know who to contact for help in your absence.
- ☐ Add a personal touch by sending cards and e-mails to clients on important professional or personal dates.
- ☐ Call your clients every three to four months without a business agenda, just to check in and see how things are going.
- ☐ Co-market and co-network with your clients by attending events together, asking them to serve on a panel with you, or writing an article together.
- ☐ Invite your clients into the firm to share background about their company or their industry and to meet other firm lawyers.
- ☐ At the end of each matter and on an annual basis, ask clients for feedback on their satisfaction and suggestions for improvements. Then act on that input.