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Seven Secrets Your Boss Wants You to Know (But Won't Tell You)

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You studied for years, passed the bar, and finally landed your first “real” legal job. But here is a news flash: you know very little about what it takes to succeed on the job. Your legal acumen and hard work are important, but you need more. After years of legal

practice both as an employee and a boss, I have learned the following secrets to success that I know will help you too.

Secret 1: Bring in more than you cost.

Most new associates are very concerned with their starting

salaries, benefits, and office locations. However, most associates never consider what law firms expect in return. Good employees pay attention to the bottom line, no matter where they are on the letterhead.

There are two parts to this equation: income and expense. De-

termining a lawyer's contribution to the income side of the practice is fairly easy. You simply track the amount of fees from your hourly billing. If you are a contingent-fee lawyer, figure the fees you generate from the cases you resolve.

Expenses can be more difficult to gauge. Your salary is easy. But what about benefits? While you won't have precise numbers, experts tell us that, on average, your benefits cost about 36 percent of your salary. If you have a legal assistant, fancy office, or great health insurance, your

expense is far higher. Even your high estimate of the cost of your benefits is probably low.

After figuring these two numbers, keep track of them on a weekly, monthly, and yearly basis. Your boss does. If at the end of the year you bring in more than you cost, you boss will be happy.

Secret 2: Work when your boss works.

Your boss wants to know that you are working hard and doing good work. In the practice of law, tracking work product is

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challenging. One way your boss will check on your work is by seeing you at work. This may seem petty, but it is not. Seeing you there creates an impression that you are working hard.

If your boss is a morning person, become a morning person and be there when she arrives. If she works late in the evening, pattern your work schedule accordingly. Seeing you there before she arrives and after she leaves tells her that you are working longer and, therefore, harder.

Secret 3: Big Brother is watching.

A prudent boss knows what her employees are doing most of the time. In this technological age, your boss may be tracking when you log in and out of your computer and what programs you are accessing and for how long.

Your boss also will closely inspect your work product. Do

your documents, memos, or e-mails (yes, e-mails count) have typographical or grammatical errors? Are your assignments completed on time? If you have problems in those areas, it will be noticed.

As important, or perhaps more important, is how you present yourself in public. Do you arrive on time for your appointments? Are you well prepared? If you appear in court, are you professional and respectful to judges and opponents? A good boss will check with judges and your opponents to see what they think about you. Perform well here and you will do well.

Secret 4: Be very careful about politics.

My first job in the legal community was as a copy clerk in Des Moines, Iowa. The firm's founding partner once warned me, "Be very, very careful about office politics." What he taught me (and it has proven true) is that expressing your views at the office on topics outside of

your work assignments can be deadly. Use the rule your mother taught you: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Mom's advice will serve you well.

Secret 5: Respect the staff.

Nearly every young lawyer underestimates the importance of office staff. The staff is a key to how well an office functions. Your boss knows how important the staff is—she probably hired them! She will be very upset if you do not treat the staff with courtesy and respect.

Staff also has far more influence over your career than you might realize. Although your boss might know your legal abilities, she knows little of your interactions with other people (see Secret 3). Your boss will rely on the staff's knowledge of you when she makes decisions about your career. If you are not well regarded by the staff, your boss will know. The Golden Rule applies: treat others the way you would like to be treated.

Secret 6: Dress for success.

Every office has a "clothing dynamic." As the new kid on the block, you need to quickly learn the real dress code of your office and fit in. Wear clothes of the same general style as the people above you in the office, including your boss. "Dress for the job you want" is good advice.

Secret 7: Confess and fix your mistakes.

This is perhaps the most important secret. You are human. You are going to make mistakes, no matter how hard you try. After all it is called "a practice" for a reason. Your boss knows you will make mistakes. She agreed to take on that risk by hiring you.

And here is another revelation: your boss wants to know about your mistakes. Why? She wants to try to fix them! Many errors can be corrected. Many difficulties can be overcome. But if she does not know about them, she cannot fix them.

How you confess your mistakes is as important as why. Meet your boss quickly in person

to explain what has happened. Have the facts at the ready. Have the documents with you. Be prepared to explain what happened in plain, simple, precise terms. Expect to be grilled.

Then take it one step further. Be ready to discuss how you propose to fix your mistake. Be ready to explain what you learned from this mistake and how you plan on preventing it from happening again. An error from which you learn is an education.

Your boss wants you to succeed. In many ways, her success depends on yours. While many of these seven secrets may seem simple, following them will help lay groundwork so your legal abilities can truly shine. Work hard, do good work, and follow these principles. If you do, you will be well on your way to success.

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