

4 Things Associates Hate About Their Jobs

By **Caroline Simson**

Law360, New York (October 29, 2015, 7:52 PM ET) -- As the junior professional in a law firm, associates are often tasked with projects that can leave them feeling underappreciated and overworked. Here, industry experts and attorneys expound on the common experiences in associate life that can make many attorneys' first jobs a not-so-rosy experience.

Long Hours

Most associates have found themselves at work on a sunny Friday afternoon awaiting the upcoming weekend with anticipation when their daydream is suddenly shattered by an "emergency" project that must be done by Monday morning. It's a scenario that's just one example of a work environment where long hours aren't likely to be appreciated, or even noted, by superiors.

Maintaining a work-life balance that's a bit more palatable for today's associates can be difficult given the law firm culture of yesteryear to which their superiors have grown accustomed. Many of the attorneys who are partners today cut their teeth by effectively devoting their life to the firm, according to Andrew M. Schpak, a partner with Barran Liebman LLP who's taken an active role in a number of young lawyer development groups.

"If you look at the Baby Boomers, a lot more of their identity is based in their profession and their job, and so it's not uncommon to look at firms' performance in hours and see that some of the senior partners are still the highest billers within the firm," he said. "If you compare that to millennials, Generation Y, even Generation X, our careers are a part of how we identify ourselves and who we are, but it's not the beginning and the end from our perspective."

That generational gap can be seen also in the ways work at the firm is done. With the lines between an associate's personal and work lives increasingly blurred thanks to email and cellphones, many tell their superiors they're constantly thinking about work anyway, so it's more efficient to work remotely, according to Candice Reed, an attorney and founder of the professional development firm Candice Reed Consulting.

Lack of Feedback

A lot of the time, even if associates put in the long hours, they're not left with any sense of whether it was a job well done. Many partners believe that associates should be able to tell that they're pleased with their work because they're not being fired, and they don't see it as their job to nurture young lawyers.

"There's still a lot of people that feel like as long as I bill the hours, nobody's really interested in my professional development as to how I could do something better or how I could actually develop some of my own clients," said Ken Young of the legal search and

consulting firm Young Mayden LLC.

But such mentoring can go a long way toward increasing job satisfaction, according to Dr. Larry Richard, founder of the consulting firm LawyerBrain LLC.

A former trial attorney who now holds a doctorate in psychology, Richard said the culture in many law firms — to only give lawyers feedback when they've done something wrong — is antithetical to what science has shown produces engagement at work.

"Even if you justify it by saying, 'Well, they don't need good feedback because the fact that they haven't been fired means that they're doing well,' that is backwards," he said. "Human beings need reinforcement, praise, feedback to know that they're doing well — even the ones who say they don't."

Mentoring is particularly important for millennials, who are known for their drive and their desire to advance in their careers relatively quickly, Reed said.

"The typical eight-, nine-, 10-year partnership track most firms have had in place for decades just does not jibe with their professional development goals," she said. "They don't want to sit around for eight years for their first chance to be promoted — I think that's one reason that you'll see a lot of associates leave after three or four years to go in-house."

Opaque Paths to Partnership

Given that drive to succeed, it's a common complaint among associates that the path to a partnership or other promotion isn't always a clear one. Even assuming associates get the training they need to become a proficient attorney, that doesn't always guarantee that they're eventually going to make partner, Schpak said.

In fact, very few firms have any sort of policy — written or otherwise — laying out the steps to become partner, he said.

"Certainly, hours and revenue generated are considered heavily, but so is your potential, and potential can mean a whole lot of things ... so you don't always necessarily get a clear answer on exactly what is expected," he added.

Often, other considerations come into play that may not be spelled out to the budding associate, such as being able to drum up business for the firm, according to Frank Michael D'Amore, founder of Attorney Career Catalysts. Many attorneys enter the field hoping to rely on their intellect to propel them to the top, and they're not keen on selling the firm to potential clients.

It's important that associates develop and hone those skills if they want to make partner, but often, they're not given the chance, D'Amore said.

"There are a lot of people who go into the practice of law, and one of the reasons why they go into a profession like that is they don't want to do all that stuff. They'd like to be able to get by just on their intellect," he said. "But today, for the vast majority of lawyers, if you're going to be ... a partner, you're going to have to have some business-getting capabilities, and it's a frustration for younger lawyers."

Sometimes, associates aren't even made aware that their work isn't up to snuff for the partner track until late in the game. They may have been coasting along with good reviews on their work and positive feedback on their firm citizenship, leading them to believe they're on the right path, only to have the rug suddenly pulled out from underneath them as late as eight years in, D'Amore said.

Excessive Negativity

Lawyers are trained to think in a way that enables them to protect their client above all else. It often leaves them questioning every motive of the people they deal with throughout the day and challenging every assertion or legal argument. It can also make them the subject of abuse from a partner who doesn't think their work is up to scratch.

But that sort of constant negative thinking is eventually going to take a toll, Richard said.

"When somebody makes an assertion — even, 'It's a fine day out' — the lawyer brain is trained to think, 'well, is that really true? Is there an exception to that? Is there a real fundamental basis for your saying that? Do you have a hidden motive in saying that?'" he said. "Negative thinking is an occupational hazard for the legal profession. You can't get rid of it because it really is required for the job."

While negative thinking may make for a good lawyer, it interferes with collaboration and lowers morale, he said. Associates in particular are affected by another kind of negativity based on the quality of their work, since they're subjected to it on a regular basis from partners. In those situations, the partner's reputation is on the line, and they're likely to have a zero-tolerance policy for mistakes, he said.

Other types of negativity extend to certain practice areas in particular, according to Reed. In litigation, success is based upon ensuring the other side loses, and that sort of conflict can be internalized, she said.

"Oftentimes when you're advocating for a client, even if the arguments you're making aren't personal to you, you're still involved in conflict," she said. "Brains can't discern whether that negative emotion is directed at you or your client."

--Editing by Christine Chun.

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