

New Year's Resolutions for the New Lawyer

By Grover Cleveland

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What are the five most important changes you can make in 2012 that will help your practice grow and make it more satisfying?

The start of a new year is a perfect time to reflect on past accomplishments and to commit to changes that will take your practice to the next level. Here are five New Lawyer New Year's resolutions to make your practice more enjoyable and more prosperous in 2012.

1. Commit to Being More Proactive About Your Career.

As a new lawyer, there is no single pathway to success. That means *you* have to take primary responsibility for managing your career and building your practice. Others can help, but you are in charge.

Think about where you want your career to be by the end of the year and develop a specific plan to accomplish your goals. As the year progresses, regularly take stock and make adjustments. Here are some questions to get you started on developing your plan:

- Are you learning?
- Are you learning what you want to learn?
- Is your work interesting?
- Are you building relationships with senior lawyers and clients?
- Which senior lawyers are most willing to invest in your success?
- What can you do to get senior lawyers to invest in your success?
- Which clients and colleagues do you like the most?
- Is your work aligned with your values?
- Is there anything about your work environment that could improve?

Reflecting on the past year's successes should also help you plan for the future. While your accomplishments are fresh in your mind, you should also update your professional biography.

To implement your career plan, focus first on changes you can make easily and the ones that will have the greatest positive impact on your career. Major changes may take a while, but try to make some progress on your career plan every day.

2. Strengthen Relationships With Clients (and Senior Lawyers).

I once worked for a public relations firm that touted its goal of “being as indispensable to our clients as they are to us.” A similar goal will serve you well with both senior lawyers and clients. At first, other lawyers will be your clients, and your main job is to do whatever you can to make their lives easier. Here are some tips for building long-lasting relationships with clients and senior lawyers:

- Take the initiative to learn more about your clients’ business and legal needs.
- Regularly thank clients (and for that matter other lawyers in the firm) for allowing you to work with them.
- Show clients that their work is important by being responsive and keeping them informed – even if just to say the work is still progressing.
- Do not tell clients that you have been delayed in working on their projects because you had to do work for another client. That sends only one message: “You are less important.”
- Focus carefully on your client’s specific problem rather than providing general legal recitations. Clients usually don’t care about someone else’s case unless it directly affects their situation.
- Get in the habit of anticipating client (and senior lawyer) needs.
- Continue to stay in touch with clients after a matter concludes.

3. Become the “Go-to Person” for a New Skill (or two).

Enhancing your skills is the key to advancing as a new lawyer. Commit to learning a new skill and becoming the “go-to person” for that skill. You are far better off being a superstar in a few critical areas than being the second-best in a whole host of areas. Gaining new skills will enable you to do more complex work, which is likely to be more interesting for you and more valuable to clients and the firm.

Similarly, doing too much low-value work will impair your progress as a lawyer. Susan Moon, in-house columnist at Above the Law, recently wrote an excellent column on [ways to deal with low-value work](#).

Learning new skills will increase your opportunities for high-value work, which in turn should help further enhance your skills. When you gain expertise in a new area of the law, remember to be assertive and tell others. Writing an article for the firm blog is an excellent way to showcase your skills to other lawyers and to clients.

4. Tame Time.

Time management is a challenge for lawyers at all levels, but learning to tame time will make your practice more enjoyable – and more profitable. Here are some tips:

- **Plan daily.** Take the time every morning to plan your day. This helps you prioritize your tasks and figure out ways to keep each project moving forward.
- **Check in.** To help with your planning, regularly ask lawyers how much of your time they expect to need in the upcoming days and weeks. (This is also a good time to solicit work, if you need it.)

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- **Develop useful routines.** Plan around the time of day that you are most productive. If you are a morning person, dive into the complex work right away and leave administrative tasks for later in the day. Handling routine matters at the same time every day can also help ensure they don't fall through the cracks.
- **Delegate.** Use support staff as much as possible. That will free up time to focus on legal work – the work you were hired to do. Doing non-legal work keeps you from progressing as a lawyer.
- **Eat your peas first.** If you tend to procrastinate, commit to spending the first fifteen minutes of each day working on a project that you have been putting off. After you start, you may find the project is not as horrible as you thought. Since projects rarely just go away, it's better to put your energy into starting than into dithering.
- **Expect the unexpected.** Allow some time in your day for unexpected projects and for projects that take longer than you expect. You can also anticipate deadlines may sometimes be shortened.

5. Improve Your Writing.

Writing is fundamental to any lawyer's success. Numerous books and programs can help you improve. Find one – today.

Best wishes for a rewarding practice in 2012!

Grover E. Cleveland is a Seattle lawyer, speaker, and the author of [Swimming Lessons for Baby Sharks: The Essential Guide to Thriving as a New Lawyer](#).