

Beyond the Basics

Developing Your Legal Career

By Shelley Dunstone

If you've been working as a lawyer for a year or two, you're probably starting to gain confidence in what you are doing. You're thinking about advancing your career. What would you like to be doing in five or ten years? Whatever your ambition, now is the time to build a foundation for the future.

First, are you enjoying the work you do? Can you see yourself doing it long-term? If not, now would be a good time to consider making a change. Your career is about how you spend your life, and it can influence the sort of person you become. A lot of people fall into a certain area because that's the job that was offered. If you're thinking of changing your field of practice, there will never be a better time to do it. The longer you stay in one field, the harder it is to swap to another one.

If you are on the right career path, you'll be moving from being an assistant to a more autonomous role. You'll need to develop your expertise, but being a competent technician is just the start. Legal practice is a business. There is an increasing emphasis on each lawyer developing a client following. How do you become being the sort of lawyer that clients seek out? How do you develop your profile and reputation?

The leap can appear daunting, but the effort is worthwhile. Lawyers who can attract clients are less vulnerable to redundancy in difficult economic times than those who rely on others to provide their work. You will also be more likely to be promoted and gain salary increases, and if you choose to change jobs you will be in demand. It also means you could employ yourself, whether through necessity or choice.

A person with a career has a different focus from someone who is just doing a job. In a job, you are doing it for the boss, and are focused on what the boss wants. In a career you are doing it for yourself, and achieve personal development through what you do for others. In a career you are focused on what your client requires. To develop your career, consider working on:

- Your client relationships

- Your referral networks
- Your profile.

Developing Your Client Relationships

Having good communication skills is a key to successful client relationships. Be responsive to your clients and answer their calls promptly. Express yourself clearly, both when you speak and when writing. Avoid using jargon and as far as possible, “speak the client’s language”.

Remember the interviewing skill of active listening? Are you using it to full advantage? Summarising and paraphrasing are powerful tools. Listen “between the lines”. What is the client’s real agenda? What are his or her expectations? How realistic are they? Does the client really appreciate the risks, what is possible and what is not?

Be confident in your questioning. It’s okay not to know everything. It’s not okay to pretend that you do. The important thing is to identify the right questions to ask. Wrong questions will never produce right answers.

Cultivate an even temper, both with clients and staff. If a client complains, listen to what they have to say. Try not to get defensive or to take it personally. Unhappy clients often don’t pay their bills. At least acknowledge their concerns, and try to see it their way. Probably you have done a good technical job, but there was something else that they wanted and were expecting, but didn’t happen. Learn something from the experience (it may also apply to other clients) and plan to communicate better next time.

Learn how to discuss fees confidently, and to give realistic estimates. Clients are likely to feel stressed about the potential expense and they need you to be frank with them about this issue. Take notice of the total fees that have been incurred in the matters you deal with, and be aware of what it typically costs to do the work. Just giving hourly rates is not very helpful to a client, because it gives no idea of how the account may ultimately add up.

Regularly explain to your client what is happening and what is going to happen next. A lot of the work that lawyers do is invisible to clients, but your account is not! Explain in general terms what you will be doing next. Send or show them copies of the documents you have prepared.

Take a wider view, to see where you fit in to the bigger picture. For clients, legal work is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. Share your clients' enthusiasm for the work they do. What are the challenges faced by your clients? Read and learn about them. What other professionals do your clients deal with? Start to mix with them. If you act for business clients, learn about your clients' businesses. What is important to them? What things are measured? How does the person you deal with spend their day? What are their challenges? How do they get promoted? What criteria do they have to meet and what goals are they working towards? What do your clients worry about? What do they read? Start to read some of it.

Developing Your Referral Networks

To get clients, you have to get out and meet people. You can't generate business sitting at your desk, but unfortunately you do have to sit there to generate fees! This means spending time on your practice after office hours. Go to networking functions. Make sure you are able to describe clearly what you can do for people. To say "I am a lawyer" is an instant conversation stopper. Be ready to give a couple of examples of ways in which you have helped clients (but of course observe client confidentiality). This can help to illustrate your approach and the sort of results that you can bring about.

Have some interesting topics of conversation ready. Be curious about what other people do. Ask people what they do and what sort of clients they are looking for, in case you are able to refer someone to them. Ask for their business cards, then hand them one of yours. Be generous with information.

Keep in contact with the people you meet. Send information that you think will interest them. People will not refer work to you just because they have met you once. Often, people do not know exactly what you offer, or do not immediately think of you. If someone does refer a client to you, thank them promptly, either by phoning or by sending a note.

Consider joining a Leads Club. These associations exist in order to help their members generate referrals. Again, you have to be willing to refer to others in order to get referrals yourself. You need to be able to state very clearly what you are able to do for people. And you are expected to attend meetings regularly, so this option is for the person who is really serious about building their business.

You could join a professional association in an industry that interests you. Go to their meetings and offer to join a committee. You'll get a new perspective on what people in that industry do, and what they think is important.

Join a service club. This is a good way to get yourself known if you deal in personal services law, e.g. family law, wills and estates, personal injuries etc. You will meet a lot of people who will introduce you to others, and you will also be contributing to the community.

Developing Your Profile

Look for opportunities to give talks. Learn how to give a good presentation. By joining Toastmasters or Rostrum you can improve your skills in a "safe" environment.

If you present at an industry meeting, stay for a while, listen to some of the other papers and network amongst the people there. Learn more about the industry and make yourself more valuable to potential clients.

Publish articles in industry publications. Make sure your article is newsworthy and easy to read, not an academic essay.

How do you think up topics for talks or articles? Keep a list of issues that you have dealt with and the things that people tend to ask you about. What are the issues that people frequently misunderstand or don't know about? These provide opportunities for you to explain things.

Become an expert in something. Read a major text on the topic. You can't read the whole thing tonight, but set yourself a goal and break it into chunks. Set aside some time regularly for reading. Read or re-read the landmark cases. Get a really good grip on the basis for the decision. Next, work out how you would explain it to a client, without using any jargon.

Developing a career requires commitment. All these suggestions involve the investment of time. If you're not prepared to put in the time, you're in a job, not a career. Some involve spending money. Maybe you can persuade your employer to pay. But if not, why not pay your own way? It's your career, and you're the one who will benefit.

Shelley Dunstone is the Director of Legal Circles. Other career tips are available at www.legalcircles.com