



Articles

20 Professionalism Tips for Millennial Attorneys

By Michelle Silverthorn ([January 27, 2015](#))

In my job, I often get asked what "professionalism" means. The word is lengthy and so is the range of what it connotes. Professionalism as it relates to lawyers means being a competent, effective, respectful advocate for your client and the justice system. As we explain in our [Professional Responsibility Education Guide](#), professionalism "calls us to be mindful of the lawyer's roles as officer of the legal system, advocate, counselor, negotiator, and problem solver." That involves respect, civility, proficiency and a recognition that the life of a lawyer is a life of continuous learning.

However as I travel the city and the state, I meet many young attorneys who want more specific, day-to-day professionalism advice. Their requests often boil down to this single question: how should I act in the workplace as a new lawyer not accustomed to the norms of the legal profession? In my years as a practicing lawyer and professional, I have learned many tips and tricks about how to succeed in this profession. I've also learned that when you need advice for an advice column, the best people to ask are your friends. So here, from myself and others, are

20 tips on how to succeed as a young professional in today's workplace:

1. Remember that you are the newest person on the team. Millennials are well-known for their team-oriented approach to projects. This may not be an approach with which older attorneys are familiar. While you may be eager to speak and contribute, remember that for many older Xers and Boomers, deference is the first sign of respect.

2. Listen first. Attorneys talk for a living. Therefore your most important job as a new attorney is to listen to what senior attorneys are telling you. Being a good listener demonstrates respect to those speaking to you, a crucial skill as you move forward in your career. To quote the Greek philosopher, Epictetus: "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak."

3. Incorporate feedback into your work. Many people, of all ages, respond to criticism defensively. However, for new attorneys, it is essential that you accept criticism and use it positively to create a changed work product or behavioral style. Doing so shows senior lawyers maturity, growth and respect. At the same time . . .

4. Project confidence, not arrogance.

Companies want to hire people who can offer their own opinions, who demonstrate enthusiasm, and who take pride and ownership in their work. That said, there is a fine line between a confident new lawyer and an arrogant one. Walk it carefully.

5. Triple spell- and grammar-check everything.

There is no excuse for poor spelling and grammar. Print out and proofread your work before submitting it.

6. Be aware of your professional dress.

Err on the side of conservatism when it comes to your professional dress, especially in your early days at the job. Older attorneys, in particular, may have certain unspoken expectations as to office wear. Learn what those expectations are. And as the saying goes, "Don't dress for the job you have; dress for the job you want." If you want to be a partner, start dressing like one.

7. Limit your personal screen time.

The hours you work and bill belong to your firm and your client. Do not spend those hours on personal blogs, social media accounts, shopping websites, etc. And remember, your company is well within its rights to track any personal use you make of company-provided devices.

8. Know your audience. This applies to both office etiquette and work product. A senior partner often wants important highlights quickly, while a more junior associate might

want more details in your report. Always understand the needs of the person to whom you are reporting, and anticipate any future needs down the road.

9. Respond to communications promptly, respectfully and in the same medium you received them. In other words, do not email in response to a voicemail, and unless text messaging is specifically initiated by your partner or client, do not use text messages as your communication medium.

10. Learn to navigate the organization's culture.

Every office, company and law firm has an organizational culture. You will benefit greatly from spending your first months listening, observing and learning those cultural norms so you can modulate your behavior accordingly.

11. Create to-do lists to maximize efficiency.

You will have multiple demands on your limited time. To-do lists will allow you to schedule responsibilities and handle various commitments effectively.

12. Make sure you manage expectations.

Do not over-commit yourself. You will end up producing sub-standard work product for attorneys who expect superior work product. Better to under-promise and over-deliver than do the opposite.

13. If you don't know, ask. While asking too many questions is one of the major criticisms of the Millennial generation, it is also essential that you understand the scope of

your assignment before tackling it. Get as much information as you can at the very beginning of an assignment and check-in with the assigning attorney when necessary.

14. Treat all staff with respect and courtesy. Everyone in your office deserves the same respect and courtesy you would like them to show to you.

15. Always follow the ethical path. There are many ethical rules that apply to lawyers, some of which are common sense, others of which are not. Learn and apply these ethical rules to your daily practice.

16. Engage in your legal community. The legal community is very welcoming to new lawyers. Take advantage of the many bar associations, alumni groups and community organizations outside of your school and immerse yourself in your greater legal community.

17. Manage your finances. Much of the advice you receive in law school focuses on student debt, but remember, your student debt is just one part of your larger financial plan. Learn about savings, retirement funds, investment portfolios, mortgages, and, if applicable, childcare costs and college tuition plans. All of these, and more, will play a crucial role in your lifetime financial picture.

18. Keep track of your accomplishments. You are your single best advocate. Throughout your career, keep track of

memoranda, projects, reviews, recommendations, and anything that demonstrates how you have positively developed as a professional.

19. Challenge yourself. Do not be content with doing a passable job. Be creative and innovative. Learn about your company or firm and always be willing to offer new ideas and tackle new projects.

20. Find a mentor. [I've said it before](#) so I will repeat it here. Find a mentor, someone who can offer you career advice, sponsor your success and stay a friend and guide throughout your career. It will take some time to find your match, but the pay-off is worth it.

So there you have it. Our 20 tips for young attorneys on being a professional in the workplace. Do you have some other advice? Feel free to share in the comments; you can start your mentoring of a newer attorney right now.

Where Are Boomer Women Mentors?

By Michelle Silverthorn ([June 30, 2015](#))

As a millennial, I often hear the same complaint from my fellow millennial women lawyers: "Why is it so hard to find a female mentor?" Digging deeper, there are often two complaints. The first: there aren't any female partners at my firm. The second: OK, yes, there are some female partners at my firm, but they often made career and family choices that I don't want to make.

Let's look at both of those. Last year, consulting group Bain & Company released the results of a five-year study on men and women in corporate America. The study asked about both genders' interest in pursuing a top management position in a large company.

The results may surprise you. In the first two years of their career, 43% of women aspired to be in top management. Conversely, only 34% of men aspired to be the same. Equally important, both genders were equally confident about their abilities to reach those top positions.

Two years later, the numbers changed, fairly dramatically. 34% of men with two or more years of experience still wanted to be in top-level management. The percentage of women however plummeted. Only 16% of women with two or more years of experience still aspired to be top-level management. Moreover women's confidence about

reaching those management positions fell by 50%. Men's confidence levels stayed the same.

Bain found that the declines in aspiration and confidence were independent of marriage and motherhood status. Rather, women felt that they failed to meet the stereotype of the ideal worker – long hours, constant smartphone use, sacrificing free time. They also felt that their supervisors were unwilling to support them and their career paths. Finally, they felt there were few role models at the top –no women in senior management meant no model to aspire toward.

Where Are the Women Leaders?

The law firm landscape shares many similarities with corporate America. According to the ABA's Commission on Women, women make up 47.3% of law school graduates. They make up 44.8% of law firm associates. However, they only make up 20.2% of partners and 17% of equity partners. And only 4% of the 200 largest law firms are managed by women. So a female millennial attorney may have the same thoughts as a young female member of corporate America – where are the women leaders and how can I become one if I don't see any?

But just wait, the 20.2% women partners may exclaim. We are here! And we do try to mentor these young women. But many of them are simply not interested in making the same career and life choices that we made.

There is some truth to that.

Millennials Opt for Life Priority

As with most things generational, this is often framed as a workplace conflict between baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, and those old enough to be their children, millennials, born between 1980 and 2000. And as a generational trend, millennials are opting out from the classic career ladder their parents may have climbed. In a recent survey, 94% of college educated millennials agreed that their generation does not support the current model of economic and career success, while 77% agreed that their personal lives would take priority over their professional goals. Not work-life balance; life priority.

The problem when it comes to mentoring relationships is that this may not be a paradigm with which many boomer women agree. Many boomer women fought hard for inclusion of family considerations in the workplace, but they understood that the reality of the workplace meant that success often meant less family and personal time. However one of the oft-cited reasons that millennials reject the corporate ladder is that they are the children of these very boomer parents. Millennials are well-aware of the time, dedication and sacrifice it takes to move up the ladder; as a generation, many have chosen to not take that path.

What happens then? Older female mentors may then find themselves frustrated by younger mentees looking to prioritize (not balance) personal lives and/or family lives.

Conversely, younger mentees may find themselves frustrated by older mentors who offer personal life options that younger mentees may not find palatable or even possible. Conflict becomes inevitable.

But the reality is that, as the largest generation in the workforce, millennials will take over leadership positions in the next few decades. Unfortunately the Bain report concluded that “[d]espite women comprising more than half of all college graduates and about 40% of MBAs, they number only a slim 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs and 17% of board members—numbers that have barely moved in decades.”

A Shared Legacy

We need to keep young women in the workplace and help them realize that there is room for women at the top. The modern American workplace has changed significantly over the past century, thanks in large part to boomer women entering, staying in and leading the workplace.

What more change can millennial women bring if they stay in the workplace to lead? I know I want to find out. So let’s encourage mentoring relationships that highlight multiple career paths, personal guidance, shared experiences, and mutual respect.

Above all, let’s recognize that older women lawyers have a hard-earned legacy they want to leave behind just as younger women lawyers have a legacy they’re only beginning to understand, and create.