

Law School's Missed Lessons: Rejecting Biz Dev Myths

By **Ronald Levine** (June 25, 2025)

While law school teaches everything from civil procedure to stare decisis, there are some aspects of practicing law that aren't covered during the three years that lead up to the bar exam. In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys offer advice on navigating real-world aspects of legal practice that are often overlooked in law school. If there is a professional skill you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

For centuries, humankind believed that the Earth was flat. Scientific inquiry and world travel proved otherwise.

While recent law school graduates are not worried about falling off the face of the Earth, they often subscribe to other myths that prevent them from exploring new business opportunities. Misguided beliefs prevent new attorneys from one of the most empowering experiences in our profession: building their own client base.

Law schools do not spend sufficient time dispelling the following myths, and largely fail to arm new graduates with business development skills that could empower them in their careers. While it may be asking too much to convince the law schools to modify their curricula, law firms can do more to assist new associates in building their practice, beginning on day one.



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Even an introverted first-year associate with a small network of personal contacts at a large firm can succeed. The first step is to bust the following commonly held myths.

Business development is for salespeople.

Many new lawyers equate business development with so-called ambulance chasing. After three challenging years in law school, they are focused on honing their courtroom and drafting skills. As fresh graduates, they believe that the only way they could attract clients would be through hardball sales tactics. They fail to recognize that business development involves truly helping clients, not snowing them.

Instead of viewing themselves as valueless salespeople, new lawyers must recognize that they can provide real assistance to potential clients. They need to focus on how they can help the client, and provide legal insights into the challenges they are facing.

Rather than setting a goal of landing an international corporation, the new lawyer should start close to home — seeking to assist a classmate, a friend or another member of the bar.

Listen to the client, and think about how you might be able to assist them. Even if you cannot assist, you may have a connection at your firm or elsewhere who can help. The first myth will hopefully evaporate after the attorney experiences the gratification of helping someone with a legal problem, even in a small way.

Law firms can assist their associates by giving them permission to open smaller matters,

and by reimbursing them for business development activities. While the firm's bottom line may be better served by having the associates devote their time and effort to established firm clients, giving associates the opportunity to develop business on their own will go a long way toward building the next generation for the firm.

Business development is only for partners.

Many new associates believe that business development is something that will be addressed way in the future, when they hopefully make partner. They believe that it would be a fruitless exercise, and a waste of time, to engage in business development before the word "partner" appears on their business card or web bio.

Waiting until you make partner to start building your practice is tantamount to waiting until the night before the bar examination to start studying. It is a little late.

If you ask successful rainmakers when they began building their foundation, they will often tell you they started early in their careers. The most successful rainmakers in law firms didn't wait for a promotion — they started laying the groundwork early.

New members of the bar are fully capable of conducting research on industries and fields that interest them. They should look for issues of interest that they can explore in depth.

Take a close look at webinars, conferences, publications and blogs that address the area's hot topics. Begin to compile lists of ideas, contacts and organizations. Consider how you can add value — by participating in a roundtable, writing an article or assisting on a pro bono project. In addition to building your network, your goal is to become a thought leader by providing unique value in your chosen area of interest.

In addition to training associates on how to conduct legal research using the most advanced technologies, law firms should spend time teaching associates how to research new industries, contacts and concepts that interest them. Each associate should be encouraged to develop a unique contact list, and should be skilled at accessing firmwide clients and contacts.

You can build a practice by simply being a good lawyer.

While new lawyers must strive to become excellent practitioners, exceptional written and oral skills will not necessarily lead to a huge book of business. Being a great lawyer is a given. But if no one knows about your talents, and you are not connected with a network, you are not likely to generate new business.

Too often, new lawyers believe it is unseemly to promote themselves. At the same time, it would be a mistake to believe that you should merely say, "I am the greatest." Rather, others will consider you to be great because you have great things to say.

By sharing what you have learned, and your unique spin on those subjects, you will go a long way toward building a following. By writing and speaking, even in small venues, you will build the necessary credibility in the eyes of potential clients.

Law firms often stage mock trials and appeals, and encourage senior associates and partners to mentor junior associates on their written work and oral advocacy skills. While those are critical activities, the firm might encourage staging a mock cocktail party where the associates' performance is critiqued.

In addition, associates should be invited to new client pitches and asked to participate. Here again, there should be a postmortem to review the associate's performance.

Introverts can never bring in business.

A significant percentage of new lawyers would prefer to sit behind their desks instead of attending cocktail parties and golf outings. They may believe that their extroverted colleagues are destined for rainmaking, and they will remain behind as service partners.

Having attended hundreds of conferences and seminars, and after more than 45 years in major law firms, it is clear to me that some of the best rainmakers are quiet thinkers who are able to build close one-on-one relationships over time.

Indeed, introverts have the distinct advantage of being excellent listeners, which is a very valuable skill in developing business. When a potential client engages with an introvert at an event, they'll likely find that the interaction feels genuine, as opposed to a situation where it feels like the attorney is scanning the horizon for the next potential contact. As I wrote in a Law360 guest article in 2023, clients value lawyers who are focused, authentic, and demonstrate loyalty and empathy.

Law firm partners may gravitate toward the more extroverted associates when selecting a team that will interface with clients. But they should also recognize the enormous value offered by the quieter associates who may do extremely well with clients by offering an ear and a creative mind.

You need a large network to build a practice.

The new lawyer may believe that significant rainmaking is not feasible without hundreds of LinkedIn connections, but there is no magic number of contacts required to develop a practice. Every rainmaker began with a very small list of contacts. So long as the list contains the right names, the lawyer will be heading down the road to success.

Survey your list of contacts — your former professors, classmates, family and friends — and begin recording your network. If they cannot utilize your services, they may know someone who might. Stay in touch with them. Share that article or blog post that reflects your unique thought leadership.

A small network of people who truly know you, and care about you, will go much further than a list of hundreds of people who delete any post upon receipt.

Law firms should make sure that each associate has been trained on all contact lists that the firm supports, and that they are regularly updating the list. The associates should be encouraged to co-author client alerts and blog posts, and be given credit when their work is shared with the lists.

Conclusion: Bust, begin and build.

By erasing these common myths from your mind, and taking small steps early in your career, you will be well on your way to building a strong business foundation. If a new associate waits to build business until they are eligible for partnership, the odds of being voted in will be significantly reduced.

Remember, the Earth isn't flat, and business development isn't a skill that will magically appear in 10 years. Armed with your law license, you can begin today. Hopefully, your law firm will provide the support and guidance you will need as you begin this lifelong journey.

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