

Articles of Note

Reflections from the Past: Things I Wish I Would Have Known in My First Few Years of Practice

By Melody C. Kiella



Have you ever looked back at a particular moment in your past and wondered if you would have made the same decision if you knew everything that you know now? While it is impossible to turn back the hands of time, it is possible to use your past and the mistakes that you made to grow and progress as a human being and as a **lawyer. When reflecting back on my legal career, I realize** that I have learned one lesson over and over again: *Things are not always what they seem.*

If I could go back in time and talk to my younger self, one of the things I would tell her is that *it's not you, it's them.*

Working at any job, including a legal job, is a lot like a relationship. For the relationship to work, it takes trust, time to develop into a cohesive relationship, and, most **importantly, compatibility. You may find yourself at a law firm or another legal job early on in your career that does** not mesh well with your personality, the way you work, or with whatever is going on in your life at that moment.

I found myself in such a position about five months after having my daughter and while I was struggling to find my

new "normal." I had been working at a small law firm for a little over three years and had felt for quite some time that something just wasn't right. No matter how hard I **tried, it never felt like I really fit in, and I had virtually no guidance or direction from the other attorneys at that firm. Eventually, I became resentful that no one made any effort** to get to know me or help me get better as an attorney. Ultimately, I ended up asking my boss for a review so that **I could address the many concerns I had about the firm** and the direction of my legal career. I intended to go into that review and talk about why I was unhappy and how I intended to leave unless changes were made, but I never got that chance.

As soon as I sat down in that conference room, I was **told that the firm could not see me becoming a partner,** and that it was most likely time for me to start looking for another job. Although I had walked into that room unhappy with my job, I found myself unable to speak and crushed by the rejection. While the exact words exchanged during that meeting are a blur to me, I do remember being told that my work was not good enough for them, and I remember feeling terrible about myself when I left. I thought that

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my legal career was doomed and that I would never be good enough.

Since departing from that firm, I have found a place where I am respected, encouraged, challenged, and mentored. Most importantly, I have learned that *I am good enough*. **Looking back on my experience at that law firm** and in that conference room, I now realize that it wasn't me, it was them.

Although rejection is never easy, I learned through that **experience that it is ok to not be a perfect fit for the law firm that hires you straight out of law school. Some people get lucky enough to find their perfect fit right away, but for others, it may take some time.** Whatever path you take, one day everything will make perfect sense.

The second piece of advice I would give my younger self is that *you are your own best advocate, and, because of that, you must ask for the opportunities and experiences that you want.*

As a young lawyer, I assumed that my boss would give me the opportunities that I needed to continue to grow and develop as a lawyer. Rather than asking for what I wanted, I patiently waited for my boss to read my mind and give me the opportunities that I was looking for. When those opportunities were not coming my way, I began to feel as if my boss was purposefully holding me back. I quickly became frustrated and eventually made the decision to **start looking for another job with a law firm that would give me the opportunities that I desired.** In the end, I found that my boss had no idea that I was seeking more opportunities and experiences or that I was the least bit unhappy. What I **thought was a concerted effort on his part to hold me back was really a failure on my part to effectively communicate** what I expected and wanted out of my career.

Once I told my boss everything that I was looking to do and what I expected out of my career, I found myself doing those very things, and I found him trying very hard to give me opportunities that I had not even thought about before. Looking back on that experience allows me to see that I am my own best advocate, and, because of that, I need **to effectively use my voice to tell people what I want and expect.** Your boss is not a mind reader and cannot know **what you really want unless you tell him or her.** If you find yourself feeling like you are not getting the opportunities and experiences that you want, then sit down with your boss and clearly communicate your expectations. The worst thing your boss can say is no, at which point you will know where your boss and your career stand.

Another thing that I wish I could tell my younger self is to *stop wishing for the future to come and take time to really enjoy the present.*

Do you remember when your mother used to tell you to stop wishing that you were older and to enjoy your youth and your lack of any real responsibility? Throughout my legal career, I have always wanted to have more, do more, **and be more. In my first few years of practice, I wanted to have more responsibility, to be relied upon, to get clients, and to have my own book of business.** I spent so much time glamorizing the idea of having more experience and my own clients that I did not enjoy being able to leave **the office at the end of the day and not answer to anyone** (except, of course, when those pesky emergencies popped up out of nowhere).

Now that I am in my eighth year of practice, I realize that with more responsibility and experience come more pressure and a whole new set of problems. In addition to having to bill hours and do good work, I am spending a lot of time **networking (both inside my firm and outside of my firm),** writing articles to be published, working on committees **in numerous organizations and within my firm, attending** various conferences each year, and feeling the pressure of always having to answer an e-mail or a phone call for fear that I will miss an opportunity that could advance my career. While it is impossible to not think about your future, I wish that I could go back in time and tell my younger self to enjoy learning new things; having new legal experiences; and only having to worry about meeting deadlines, billing hours, and doing good work.

If you find that you are always thinking about the future and what you don't have, think back to those times you were a kid wishing you could be an adult and remind yourself that **your first years of legal practice are the equivalent** of you being a kid. Enjoy the present as much as possible because (hopefully) the future will inevitably come.

If I could go back in time, I would also tell my younger self that *helping others with non-legal tasks or matters will help you in the long run.*

As a young lawyer, I was often asked by more senior attorneys and partners to assist them in writing an article to be published in a legal journal or with personal, non-billable tasks. I often found myself feeling irritated that I was asked to help, wondering why they couldn't ask someone else to help them with non-billable tasks. But as time passed, I realized that my help was greatly appreciated by these attorneys and that they remembered my help months and even years later, oftentimes returning the favor

by introducing me to important people, helping me get involved in organizations, and giving me opportunities that were not given to other people. Over time, I have come to realize that helping those attorneys with non-billable tasks actually helped me in the long run. Next time you feel frustrated because you spent an entire day researching to help another lawyer with a non-billable issue, focus on the positive that the lawyer you are helping will remember **your help and sacrifice and repay the favor at some point in the future.**

Another piece of advice I would give my younger self is that, *while there are no stupid questions, there are absolutely questions that should not be asked before you've thought them through.*

Even if you are new to practicing law and have a question about an assignment that you've been given or how to **respond to a specific situation, it is important to make sure** that you have thought about the answer to your question before you ask it. I know this seems counterintuitive, but thinking through the possible scenarios before asking the question will put you in a better position to articulate the issues and discuss the various options with your boss.

Young lawyers have so many resources at their fingertips (Westlaw, Google, legal blogs, and other young lawyers) that there really is no excuse for not having thoughts on how to proceed with a particular issue, even if those thoughts end up being wrong in the end.

While law school does not necessarily teach you how to practice law, it should at the very least teach you to be **analytical. So, even if you find yourself in a situation where** you have no idea what to do next, take the time to sit down and really think about the answer to your own question. If you are unable to determine how you should proceed and end up asking your boss the dreaded "stupid" question, then at least you will be able to articulate your thoughts and, at the same time, show your boss that you are capable of trying to handle these situations on your own.

The last thing I would tell my younger self if I could is that **work-life balance may be hard to find all of the time, but it does exist if you make it a priority.**

As a working mom with high career aspirations, I often feel like I am not giving enough either at home or at work.

I find that I am in a constant battle with myself over how much to give to my daughter, my husband, myself, and my work. Some days, I give all of my energy, time, and focus to work, but other times, I feel pretty equally balanced in my **time and efforts.**

The legal profession is not one where everything stops at **5:00 p.m. Bosses, colleagues, and clients will e-mail and call** you after hours and when you are on vacation. Sometimes, this can be frustrating, and it can feel like your work is always with you. Trust me, the e-mails, phone calls, client functions, and deadlines will always be there and will begin to consume your entire life unless you purposefully draw a **line and find a balance.**

After allowing work to completely consume my life, I realized that I am my own worst enemy. In the end, I was the one pushing myself too hard, and I was the one working when I should have been taking time for my health or my family. It is important to remember that you know yourself and your limits better than anyone else. If you feel like work is taking over your life, then think of ways to implement boundaries between your work and personal life and stick to those boundaries, even if it means saying no to someone.

Remember, your health and family are more important than billing hours, and you are the only one who can create a work-life balance that works for you.

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