

4 Ways Associates Can Be Invaluable To Partners Right Now

By Aebra Coe

Law360 (April 17, 2020, 4:11 PM EDT) -- As law firms face uncertain times and unprecedented challenges amid a global pandemic, partners say there are big opportunities for associates to contribute value to their teams and stand out as strong future leaders, even while working remotely.

Associates who contribute important work and ideas now can demonstrate they are an essential part of the law firm and are poised to take the leadership reins when the time comes, said practice group leaders and partners at a number of BigLaw firms.

"Quite frankly, if there are any classes of associates who are prepared to handle the radical change in the practice of law presented by this pandemic, it is today's associates," said Mary Beth Johnston, co-leader of K&L Gates LLP's global health care and FDA practice.

"There is certainly no more technologically prepared group of lawyers to handle the challenges of working remotely and no group of lawyers who has been better trained to multitask and in turn be better able to stay focused in a time of disruption, both personally and professionally," Johnston added.

Here are four suggestions from partners and firm leaders on how associates can stand out and show they are indispensable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Be Flexible and Become a Subject Matter Expert

As work slows down in some areas and picks up in others, associates can contribute to the firm by being flexible and offering a hand in areas and to practice groups that are outside their usual purview, according to Daphne Higgs, managing partner of Perkins Coie LLP's Palo Alto, California, office.

"Times like these can provide a unique opportunity to roll up your sleeves and work on a new project or hone in on a new skill," Higgs said.

With any free time they have, an associate can also strengthen their expertise in a specialty area within their practice or take on a pro bono project that aligns with their area of legal expertise and ethical beliefs, she added.

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DAPHNE HIGGS
Perkins Coie

And as they develop expertise in new areas and assist in pro bono work, associates can showcase their newfound knowledge or wins by publishing short articles covering key takeaways for clients.

"Continual skill development is a primary characteristic of a leader, and it's important that it doesn't fall by the wayside even during busy times," Higgs said.

Events such as a pandemic often come with novel legal challenges and changes, which can be an opportunity for associates to bring their creativity to the table and become a subject matter expert in a particular area. These areas could include the contractual defenses related to force majeure or material adverse event clauses, bankruptcy-related issues, or the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, said Lisa Bebchick, hiring partner for Ropes & Gray LLP's New York office.

"Raising a hand to assist in tackling a subject area and becoming a go-to firm expert on a particular topic is a great way to distinguish yourself and meaningfully contribute during these challenging times," Bebchick said.

Get Outside Your Communication Comfort Zone

Clear communication is vital for associates in a time when attorneys are separated from one another physically and teams are tasked with responding to a quickly changing crisis, according to Denise Lazar, co-chair of Barnes & Thornburg LLP's toxic tort practice group.

That often means stepping outside the email comfort zone and getting on the phone or on a videoconference call, several partners said.

Additionally, with everyone working from home, there's a risk of being "out of sight and out of mind" when it comes to being noticed by partners, Lazar said.

"Be a squeaky wheel," she suggested. "Take the initiative to reach out to partners opening new matters in areas of interest to you."

The same goes for being visible to clients, according to Perkins Coie's Higgs.

"Keeping in touch with clients is more important than ever," Higgs said. "By proactively implementing videoconferencing, rather than just relying on email and phone conversations, associates can facilitate conversations that promote cross-selling and stronger, broader relationships during a time when clients are most desperate for legal counsel."

Associates should check in with the partners they regularly work with to see if they can be of help, Ropes & Gray's Bebchick said. And, she added, now is a great time to reach out to somebody new with whom an associate has long aspired to work.

"Share a recent article of interest or propose writing an article together," she said. "Being front of mind is all the more important when you cannot actually be in front of someone in the office."

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LISA BEBCHICK
Ropes & Gray

Do Good Work and Offer Up Ideas

Opportunities abound right now for attorneys to handle non-billable assignments, said K&L Gates' Johnston.

"Non-billable work, especially in the nature of client alerts, webinars and presentation outlines, offer tremendous learning opportunities, including learning more about a client's business or an industry, which necessarily will increase the ability of an associate to contribute in the future," she said.

In times of crisis, associates will often have to make extra effort to continue delivering good work as partners need it, according to Richard Greenberg, principal of Jackson Lewis PC's New York office.

"What a partner seeks most in an associate — and potential future partner — is someone who can be trusted to provide quality assistance at any time, regardless of the circumstances," Greenberg said.

As an example, Greenberg pointed to work the firm's associates have put in to provide clients with surveys focused on COVID-19 issues, which need to be updated in real time as the situation changes in various states and local jurisdictions.

An "enormous amount" of organization and detail is required to manage the updates, he said. The teams working on the project are led by mid-level and senior associates and are made up of junior associates, all working under the supervision of a partner.

"We have been beyond impressed by the independent work we are seeing and the level of daily commitment," Greenberg said. "The best associates have used this crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate to firm leadership that if anything is needed at any time, they are here to help."

Be Well and Remember What's Important

Many associates feel anxiety and pressure to perform to an impossible standard, even as the world experiences a massive crisis. It's important to take a step back and realize that a self-compassionate approach can be more productive in the end, according to Sarah Bouchard, Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's Philadelphia office managing partner.

"Our advice to associates striving to succeed during this time: Do not beat yourself up," Bouchard said.

Instead, she said, young attorneys can reframe their thoughts, reflecting on why they chose to pursue law as a profession. If that reason is to serve clients, then there are opportunities to be useful, she said.

"Today's law firms are pioneering solutions for clients who are facing problems that are novel, urgent and incredibly serious. Everyone is a critical team member in that effort," Bouchard said. "If you are inundated with work, ask for help. Remember that the goal is to deliver the best product to the client, always."

Attorneys can also maintain perspective and gain a sense of well-being by thinking about how they can help others during this time, said Deborah

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SARAH BOUCHARD
Morgan Lewis

Barnard, Holland & Knight LLP's professional growth and development partner.

"Be proactive, engaged and supportive," Barnard said.

That could mean raising ideas on a client matter or a way the firm could assist its attorneys, clients or communities better during the pandemic, or it could mean taking on pro bono work, she said.

"[Associates can] be supportive of those they come into contact with throughout their days and make an effort to reach out to others," she said. "Everyone is likely coping with some stressors right now and as the old saying goes, 'A little kindness goes a long way.'"

--Editing by Kelly Duncan and Jack Karp.