

Professional Perspective

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Rainmaker Skills for a Junior Associate

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Quite possibly the most intimidating buzzword that new attorneys confront is “rainmaker.” A rainmaker is a person who brings clients, business, and money to their firm. Managing client relations and developing new business are crucial to the success of every law firm and attorney.

However, the concept of business development can be daunting at times. Because the responsibility for managing clients is usually the responsibility of partners and senior associates, many junior associates may try to reassure themselves that becoming a rainmaker is a challenge for the future. But one does not simply become a rainmaker overnight. Developing the skills necessary to attract new clients, maintain existing relationships, and ultimately bring in new work is a process that starts on day one.

Rainmaker Skills for Junior Associates

As a junior associate, there are several ways that you can hone your business development skills early in your career, for example: treating partners like clients, maintaining connections with former colleagues and classmates, and becoming a subject matter expert. Recognizing the relevance of these skills and taking advantage of opportunities to develop them can help you get on the path to becoming a rainmaker sooner rather than later.

Partners Are Your First Clients

As a new associate at a law firm, your first “clients” are firm partners. The knowledge and skills you develop as you work with partners can be readily transferred to business development. Establishing and maintaining good relationships with partners helps you create a consistent flow of work. Similarly, establishing and maintaining good relationships with clients creates a consistent flow of high-quality work for law firms.

So how can you, as a junior associate, start developing strong partner relationships?

Producing high-quality work product is the most important aspect to building these relationships. Related to this, prioritizing a partner's work and making sure the partner knows you are doing so, can be extremely beneficial to your working relationship. Treating even the smallest task with the utmost importance and professionalism will leave a great impression on your supervising partner.

Good communication skills are also important to maintaining a good relationship with partners. Clarifying project objectives, providing frequent project status updates, and staying in touch with partners—even when there are no pending projects for that particular partner—can help maintain open lines of communication. Such practices can reduce the incidence of mistakes due to miscommunication, can demonstrate professionalism and interest in the work, and can position you at the forefront of your partner's mind for the next available project.

Although generating high quality work and communicating clearly are critical to strong partner relationships, there are other important considerations that have nothing to do with substantive work. Partners also want to work with people who they like personally. Even though your work product may be excellent, you may not be at the top of the list to receive the next project if a partner does not enjoy working with you. Getting to know partners, finding common interests other than work, being conversational, and having a positive attitude are all ways of establishing a strong professional relationship.

You can also make a good impression on partners by being involved in the firm. For example, you can join affinity groups to connect with other attorneys at the firm and to work to build an even more accepting and inclusive workplace. You can also volunteer to help plan the holiday party for your office to show that you appreciate your colleagues. Participating in recruiting can also show that you are engaged with the firm. By showing that you are committed to improving the firm you are also showing partners that you enjoy working at the firm and you are a long-term fixture deserving of meaningful client work.

These skills and attributes that enable you to build strong partner relationships will also help you to become a successful rainmaker. Clients are not only looking for good work product but are also looking for lawyers that are relatable and positive, that will prioritize their work, and that communicate well. Thus, being deliberate about creating and maintaining good relationships with partners can help you become a rainmaker down the road.

Stay in Touch With Colleagues & Classmates

Another way for you, as a junior associate, to get on the path to becoming a rainmaker is to stay in touch with past colleagues and classmates. These people may be in a situation down the road where they need legal assistance or know someone who needs legal assistance. Some of these connections may become in-house counsel at a firm client or a potential client. Attorneys who have developed wide networks will be better situated to provide the legal assistance needed. Friends are more likely to hire friends who they know and like personally because they trust them to handle their legal work.

Thus, you should check in with past colleagues and classmates. The best way to create and maintain a network of friends who may become clients is to establish contact with friends early and to communicate with as many past co-workers and classmates as is practical. You can manage your growing network by creating a spreadsheet with all of your contacts, notes about your previous conversations, and when you last talked. Adding calendar reminders may also make it easier to remember when it is time to reach out. You can also make a point of joining bar organizations or other groups in the community that your contacts are a part of so you can see them on a regular basis.

The further removed you become from these people, the less genuine and authentic a reconnection will feel. This is especially true when the underlying goal of the reconnection is blatantly to solicit their business. The earlier you reach out to your friends, the more genuine it will feel, and the easier it will be to ask for work when that opportunity presents itself.

Become a Subject Matter Expert

As a junior associate, another way for you to get on the path to becoming a rainmaker is to become a subject matter expert. Within your practice area, you should identify particular subtopics where you believe you can become an expert. You may want to consider what expertise your firm needs and how you can situate yourself to fill that need. This involves getting to know people across your firm so that you know their specialties and know where you might best support the firm by developing expertise. Being able to speak intelligently about at least one topic within your practice area will bolster your credibility with your peers, partners, and with potential clients.

Writing articles, speaking at conferences, and teaching in the community and at CLE events are also great ways for you to become an expert. Developing a reputation and an online presence as an expert in a particular subtopic will help attract potential clients. If a potential client is searching online regarding a specific issue that they have and your publications and speeches regarding that issue come up, that potential client may reach out to you for help.

Bringing in New Clients & Maintaining Existing Clients

The opportunity to develop new business for the firm may come sooner rather than later. You can utilize the business development skills discussed above to land new clients and bring in new billable work by playing to your strengths, knowing both your firm and your clients, and by providing good service.

Play to Your Strengths & Interests

There is a common misconception that being a rainmaker requires a certain personality type. Business development is not one-size-fits-all. The idea that a rainmaker must be outgoing and charming and needs to wine-and-dine potential clients is not accurate. Although rainmakers with a certain personality can be very successful, there are many other ways of wooing potential clients.

The key is to find what you personally enjoy and determine your strengths. Invite potential clients—who may be one of those former classmates or colleagues you've kept in touch with—to a non-work activity. If you enjoy fine dining, invite potential clients to an exclusive restaurant. If you are more of a sports person, invite potential clients to a game. For attorneys with families, organizing a kid-friendly event may be a good idea. You can also organize an event to perform charity work within your community and invite clients and potential clients to volunteer. Many companies are emphasizing employee involvement in charitable initiatives, so not only will this make your client contacts look good in the eyes of their company, but it will also give you a great opportunity to connect with them.

You can also invite your potential client contacts to work-related events too, of course. Speaking at conferences or CLEs can be a great way to show off your knowledge and connect with your network. Encouraging clients to join a bar organization or other community group you are involved in or asking them to attend or speak at an event hosted by that group can be a good opportunity to get to know your clients. You can also work with your firm's business development team to organize client-focused educational events and invite those clients that may find it particularly useful or interesting.

This is only a small subset of potential business development ideas. Each attorney can have their own personal strategy focused on their personality and interests. The key is to understand your strengths, find commonalities and similar interests with your clients and potential clients, and find events and activities that you can bond over.

Know Your Firm & Your Client

Making a connection with a potential client is not the end of the road; it is only the beginning. As you develop the relationship with a client, apply your subject-matter expertise and partner-communication skills to sell yourself and your firm to the client. A successful rainmaker knows how to present herself as an expert in her field and knows how to sell the expertise of the rest of her team. The potential client's work likely will not be limited to a single practice area. By understanding how your skills can meld with the skills of others at your firm, you will be in a great position to pitch what your team can offer.

Understanding the client's business and how your expertise can support it is vital to creating a pitch that will resonate with the client and to providing high-quality service. Successful rainmakers research their clients and know the poignant and intelligent questions to ask to best understand and, thus, best serve their clients. Indeed, many attorneys make it rain by gaining an exceptional understanding of their client's business, including the very minute details of the business.

Provide Good Service

Finally, there is no replacement for excellent service and high-quality work product. Just as good work is key for you, as a junior associate, to develop relationships with your partners, it is critical to rainmaking with clients. Every other aspect of the professional relationship can be present, but if your service and work product fall short of the client's expectations, the relationship is unlikely to last. Rainmakers are not only great at creating and maintaining client relationships, but they are also laser-focused on providing exceptional services that their clients value.

Conclusion

Getting on the path to becoming a rainmaker may seem like a daunting task. But it does not have to be. Business development is a skill that can be learned and refined. As a junior associate, you should make a conscious effort to practice these skills early on in your career. Putting an emphasis on building connections and taking steps to improve your business development skills early can reduce the stress and fear surrounding bringing in new business and can set you on the path to becoming a rainmaker.