

What a new lawyer should know



By David Susler
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Here is a portion of the conversation. An extended version is on video at chicagolawyer.com

From working with younger lawyers, how have you seen legal education change?

Tina Martini: These days, law schools seem to be making more of a concerted effort to better prepare students for the realities of practicing law. This is true not only with respect to better developing their writing, research, drafting and oral advocacy skills, but also teaching them about the business of law as well.

All of these tools, as well as good common sense, pragmatism and strong people skills, are vital tools to ensure that young lawyers hit the ground running when they begin their practice and law schools seem to recognize this fact and try to help their students accordingly. At the end of the day, these capabilities enable their students to be more competitive in the marketplace, which ultimately inures to the benefit of both the students as well as the schools.

David Susler: I think Tina captures the primary substantive changes in legal education. Another major difference from when I went to law school is that everything is now computerized and online.

That may be an afterthought today, but when you compare it to the world as it was when I went to law school, it is a dramatic change.

For example, there was only one student in my first year class who had a PC. We learned to use Westlaw and Lexis, which each had their own dedicated, color-coded computer terminals.

But we were not allowed to use them for legal research and writing class. Today, I'm not sure if law schools even teach manual research

and everyone has a computer and Internet access in the classroom.

But as much as some things may have changed, the core classes remain the same and the stress and fear, especially in the first year, live on.

What is the No. 1 skill that you want new lawyers to have when they come out of law school?

Martini: To me, the most important skill for a new lawyer to have is a fire in the belly. When I was the hiring partner for my office, I met and interviewed many hundreds of law students who already had a track record of academic excellence and success. The common denominator across the vast majority of them was intelligence.

However, I found that a strong passion for the law and intellectual curiosity, coupled with that fire in the belly, were not nearly as easy to find.

What those qualities translate to is someone who combines both sheer intellect and a very strong sense of motivation to yield a high-performing individual whose attitude and desire to learn and succeed transforms into top-notch work product and the delivery of exceptional client service.

Susler: I do not work with new lawyers very often in my practice but I do mentor them. The No. 1 skill I would want them to have is research and writing ability. You could say these are two skills, but they go hand-in-hand.

As a mentor, as well as a client, I would say that the No. 1 attribute I would like new lawyers to possess is emotional intelligence. This includes traits such as self-awareness and social awareness, traits which enhance one's ability to provide strong, effective client service and to develop business.

Do you think law students should also take business classes? Why or why not?

Martini: I absolutely think they should take business classes.

No matter where law students end up starting their careers after they graduate, every legal environment is a business — and it is very important to understand the business behind the practice of law.

It is also vital to understand your clients' business as well since it provides the context within which their legal issues arise, need to be addressed and resolved.

I believe every law school should require their students to take basic business classes so as to be sensitized to and understand these important issues from the moment they begin practicing law.

Susler: Yes, I do. A basic understanding or knowledge of business will help them succeed in their careers. There are basic business law courses they should take, such as business organizations, bankruptcy and creditors' rights and secured transactions. In addition, if you were not an accounting or business major, an accounting for nonmajors course can be very useful.

Virtually all lawyers will embark on a career path that touches business in some way, even though they might not expect it, so it is important to have a basic understanding of it. If you want to manage a firm or your own practice someday, or especially if you want to go in-house, you need to understand at least the basics of business. ■

David and Tina are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married to each other. If you have any questions or topic ideas please e-mail them.

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