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A call to action for both young, veteran lawyers

This September marks the 21st anniversary of the beginning of my legal career at Rudnick & Wolfe. At the time, R&W was a large Chicago-based law firm known for its first-rate real estate and franchise practices.

I was one of 10 new associates who walked in with few, if any expectations of staying in our jobs for very long. Even back then, large law firm life was very challenging and not for the faint of heart. We all knew the harsh reality — most young lawyers leave their first big-law jobs within a year or two.

Upon my arrival, I quickly discovered that life in a large firm is what you make of it. I was privileged to be working with some of the best and brightest legal minds our profession has to offer. At the same time, my colleagues were just normal, fun people and had families, friends and outside interests. They immediately made me feel at ease, taught me a lot and became my family away from home.

Little did I know that the months and years would breeze by, and I would wake up one day as a senior partner who has spent nearly half my life here — and that the 200-lawyer regional real estate and franchise firm where I started my career has evolved into one of the biggest global law firms in the world as DLA Piper.

Why have I stayed? Because I believe in the firm and in my ability to be successful here. I am also committed to giving back to the firm and contributing to others, particularly our young lawyers, so that they too can thrive in their careers.

What makes today's legal professionals successful?

Much has been written about

the future of today's young lawyers. Law firm associates have traditionally been afforded a long runway in their development. However, the significant shift in the legal profession as a business has precipitated the need to drive down costs and improve efficiency in delivering legal services. As a result, talent management and professional development have become key drivers of a firm's economics, and associates must now develop at a much steeper trajectory to satisfy client demands and for a law firm's economic model to work.

Moreover, with millennials now a critical part of the workforce, we are seeing a convergence of several generations of professionals working together. This confluence of factors has resulted in significant debate as to how associates and firms can thrive in today's environment.

I believe that it takes a village for today's young lawyers to succeed. They need to take responsibility for their lives, and to stay committed and focused. And for those of us who are further along in our careers, we must help them along the way. This is my call to action.

I know that I could not have made it as a lawyer without help. But it was also my responsibility to ultimately make something out of my life.

As a student, I felt very passionate about pursuing a career in the law and projected that "fire in the belly" as I interviewed with various law firms. As a result, I was able to secure a number of callbacks. And as I was deciding which firm was the best fit for me, I conducted thorough research and took the time to meet with many different attorneys. I was then able to

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quickly pare the list of viable firms, and the decision of where to go was surprisingly easy.

Choosing the right place to work was just the beginning of my process. I then needed to figure out what work excited me, who were the best trainers and what the political dynamics were at the firm. I also learned pretty quickly that when someone moves your cheese, you need to take responsibility for figuring out how best to adapt.

There were a few things telling me I should pursue a career in intellectual property law, including the fact that there was an opportunity for an attorney at my level to join the group. I also had a keen interest in the practice area and felt very at ease with the other attorneys in the practice. It turned out to be a great fit — the training and mentoring has been second to

none and has enabled me to be the lawyer I am today.

But the hard work doesn't stop there. As I continue to grow and develop my practice today, I try to look for ways to pay it forward. This includes training junior attorneys. There are few things more valuable than providing honest, real-time feedback so that associates can develop as quickly as the profession now demands.

While being a terrific practitioner is vital, it is not the be all and end all. If you aspire to have a meaningful professional profile, you must participate in activities that enable you to develop the necessary leadership and business development skills both within and outside your organization and beyond just your day-to-day client work. It will sometimes be a time-consuming, stressful and even painful journey, but this is the only way to truly catapult your career forward.

Finally, let's not underestimate the power of having a positive attitude and keeping the faith. Everyone's career has its ups and downs. It is important to keep perspective, particularly through the tough times, and to not make precipitous changes to your circumstances without thinking them through carefully. I have found that making a change can often make a tough situation even worse.

So, for all of you young lawyers out there, take responsibility for your careers. Be intellectually curious, don't give up and stay humble along the way. And for all of you experienced lawyers, find a young attorney to mentor today — better yet, find two, three or even more. It is incumbent upon us to help shape the future of the profession.