

# How to Succeed in a Commercial Law Firm:

## 5 tips for law clerks and law graduates



Being a law clerk at a commercial law firm is a different thing from studying at law school. Instead of working for yourself, everything you do will be for a client. In your day-to-day work as a clerk, you should think of your supervising lawyer as that 'client'. That's why it's important to turn up ready to do what needs to be done, and to do it well. After a year and a half as a law clerk at Civic Legal, I've narrowed down my experience to 5 tips to help you start your career at a commercial law firm.

### 1. Make your supervising lawyer's life easy

You'll find out quickly that lawyers do demanding and complex work. The most valuable thing you can do is anticipate exactly what your supervising lawyer needs, and get it done before they need it. You won't be able to do that from the very start, but you can work on it from your first day. Pay attention to your supervising lawyer's writing style and their approach to tasks. Try to know as much about their work as you can, ask what deadlines they have coming up, and think about why you're working on a task. That way, you can predict what the next steps will be in each matter. It's a great feeling to be able to respond to your supervising lawyer's request with: 'I've already done that'.

### 2. Always be positive

At the end of a vacation clerkship at one of the big firms, my supervising lawyer started their feedback with: 'I was worried you'd annoy me when they gave me a clerk, but you actually fit in really well'. Apart from the tone of surprise, that's a pretty good compliment for a law clerk to get. If you can get on well with everyone at work by being positive, you'll end up being well-liked. That helps you enjoy your job, but it also means you'll be invited to court hearings, have lawyers tell you their war stories, and find that your colleagues want to do what they can to help you at the start of your career.

### 3. Do excellent work

We start to build our reputation when we're law clerks. That means doing your best work on everything that comes before you. It won't take long, if all your work is excellent, for lawyers to trust you and to give you more challenging and important tasks. But how do you do excellent work?

Here are a few ways:

- Confirm your supervising lawyer's instructions by summarising them in your own words and checking it's what they want you to do.
- Do the extra research required to support your memos, and provide pinpoint references to your sources.
- Write clearly and succinctly so your supervising lawyer doesn't have to search for the answer, or re-write your draft letters.
- Pay attention to detail and edit your work to eliminate mistakes.
- Ask your colleagues for examples of the documents you're asked to draft, and ask your supervising lawyer for memos and documents they thought were excellent.

If you can do all that, you'll be well on your way to being a valued law clerk.

### 4. Get involved and contribute when you can

Opportunities to do challenging work, attend hearings, or develop your skills aren't always given to you. Often, you need to seek them out. So, knock on the door of a senior lawyer and ask if there's anything you can help them with. Get involved in conversations between lawyers in the break room and see if you can contribute something from your experience. Always accept invitations to lunch with the lawyers — they'll always talk about an interesting case they're working on, or give you a chance to get to know them. Then, follow up and see if you can have a go at a first draft of a statement of claim, or a letter of advice, or a set of submissions. Doing this kind of work is the best way to learn and prepare to be a lawyer.

## 5. Consider clerking at a boutique firm

It's easy to think that the large commercial firms are the only ones worth seeking out. Boutique firms don't have the same marketing budgets, so many law students don't find out about the opportunities they offer. That's not a reason to ignore them. I have spent time at both large and boutique firms. While the experience is different, both give you the chance to develop your skills. In fact, because the matters that boutique firms deal with are smaller and there are fewer people, you're more likely to have the chance to be directly involved in complex legal work.

At Civic Legal, I've had the chance to draft statements of claim, defences, and submissions, whilst working closely with senior lawyers. I've interviewed witnesses and contributed at client meetings. I've also regularly had the chance to attend and assist at hearings at the Supreme and District Courts. Beyond the work, you will also have the chance to get to know everyone who works at your firm. My colleagues at Civic Legal have been incredibly supportive, turning up to my law competitions and giving me advice while I was writing my thesis. It's provided a sense of belonging to the firm which is harder to achieve at firms with hundreds of lawyers.

Starting out as a law clerk or law graduate shouldn't be daunting. It's an exciting beginning to what could be a long and interesting legal career. If you can go into your work confidently and with a positive attitude, you should learn a great deal and meet some excellent people who will support you through your career.

- by Chris Burch

*Ed: If you were wondering whether the author has actually been successful at a commercial law firm, Civic Legal confirms without hesitation that it values Chris highly, and that other law clerks and graduates would benefit from taking his advice.*