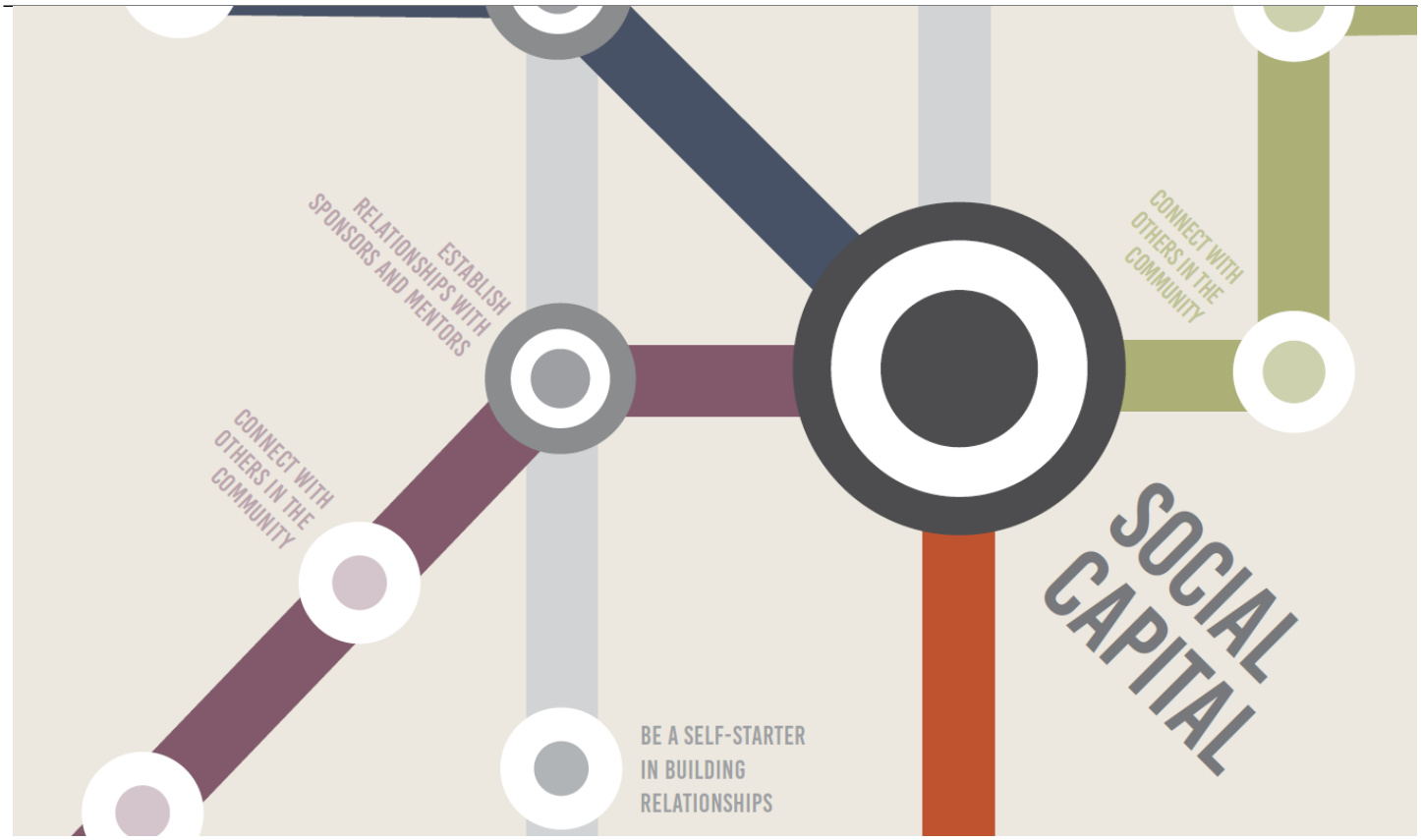
A Mid-level Attorney’s Guide to Building Social Capital in the Workplace

Career Development



CHEAT SHEET

- ***Relationships.*** Sponsors and mentors can help you build social capital, find opportunities for leadership, and develop expertise in a chosen area.
- ***Expertise.*** As mid-level lawyer, you should be looking to become a subject-matter expert in an area of interest to solidify your standing as a valuable and indispensable part of your organization.
- ***Volunteer.*** Get involved with any aspect of the community that interests you, such as a local law school, your alumni network, or mentoring future lawyers.
- ***Representation.*** Represent your organization in professional activities outside of work. This can enhance your influence and position at work as you strive to advance your career goals.

There is ample guidance on how to succeed as a first-year attorney, and seasoned attorneys fully grasp the complexities of substantive projects and social cues. However, mid-level attorneys are often caught in between. They understand more than their entry-level colleagues, but do not yet have the depth of knowledge, nor the experience, of seasoned lawyers. Despite this, there are few resources targeted at mid-level lawyers. To take their career to the next level, mid-level lawyers need to focus on demonstrating value in the workplace and building social capital. Mid-level lawyers also

face unique challenges of experiencing first time leadership roles and managing the work of others, but also reporting to senior lawyers or business leaders within the company. This article offers advice on practical and proactive steps individuals can take to advance their careers and build important skills at this stage — about seven or eight years after being admitted to the bar. After all, mid-level attorneys will be the next leaders in their companies, firms, and communities. Thus, it is beneficial for all when mid-level attorneys understand what they need to do today to be the best leaders of tomorrow.

Specialization and leadership development

The general advice for entry-level lawyers is to work in as many areas of the law as possible to find the type of law that they like best. After being a generalist for two to three years, a mid-level attorney should begin to have a good idea of the subject in which they wish to specialize. In fact, you will likely begin to see that the subject matter you like best is the one that you are most excited about, and your passion will show in your work. After determining the type of law in which you would like to specialize, the next step is to take action and begin your journey to becoming an expert — both substantively and objectively.

Create opportunities for yourself

Create opportunities for yourself by volunteering for assignments that will make you more knowledgeable about issues within your selected subject matter. You can also volunteer for opportunities in other legal groups at your company or work pro bono for a local nonprofit or bar association. While the mid-level career stage is often dubbed the “sweet spot,” mid-level lawyers can be caught in the revolving door of work without advancement. Use volunteerism as an opportunity to build new skills and to network in the practice area in which you wish to specialize. Further, consider taking on a leadership role in an organization or nonprofit. As a leader, you will gain experience working with a variety of personality types, communicating goals and expectations, and motivating others while ensuring timelines are met.

You also should begin writing and presenting on topics within your selected subject matter. This will expand your knowledge and show people at your company and in your community that you are moving from being a generalist to becoming an expert in a particular area of the law. “The best test of whether or not you really understand a concept is trying to teach it to someone else.” This is because “[t]eaching removes the possibility of self-deceit” and tests whether you truly understand a concept.

Seek leadership development opportunities and business training

Mid-level attorneys often take on management roles for the first time, perhaps without prior managerial experience. This can be especially challenging for lawyers who may not have formal training in managing people or leading and inspiring a team. Fortunately, many companies offer support to managers through leadership development workshops and management skills training; these trainings may even be available to individual contributors. Participate in any programs your company offers and consider that these programs will likely provide valuable insight into company culture as well. Your genuine participation also tangibly reaffirms your commitment to the company.

A wide array of professional organizations offer quality leadership training and “soft skills” workshops. Most professional legal associations, both local and national, offer seminars and

trainings, whether via webinar at your desk over the lunch hour or intensive in-person workshops lasting a day or more. Many business organizations offer these types of courses as well, so you may find programs with a business focus and content tailored to your industry. As an in-house attorney, developing business acumen is critical to advising your clients on legal issues. Additionally, familiarizing yourself with business terminology and trends will allow you to provide practical and holistic advice to your clients. Finally, if your company does not offer leadership or business training, consider enrolling in a class at a local college or university. Further developing expertise in a certain area may open the doors to advancement and increased compensation.

Establish relationships with sponsors and mentors

A key step in career success is finding a sponsor who is familiar with your work and who will invest in your success and connect you to others. Sponsors are "the ones actively advocating for your next promotion or raise. They're pulling you up through the ranks of a company or industry, making sure your name is brought up in closed-door meetings." At your company, find the people who will help you rise through your organization and enable you to be compensated at a level commensurate with your increasing knowledge and experience. Now that you are a mid-level attorney, you should be familiar with who at your organization is doing the type of work you want to focus on and who is in a position to include you in projects that will help you develop expertise. Be intentional with whom you select and remember that developing a relationship does not happen overnight. You also may want to develop several different sponsors who support you in different aspects of your pursuits.

Additionally, if you do not already have one, a mid-level lawyer should also establish a relationship with at least one mentor. A mentor should not be confused with a sponsor. Mentors are key figures who guide you through the working world. They're like the rarely seen guardian angels guiding your career and life along. Ideally, you should find mentors both inside and outside your company. Inside mentors understand the nuances of your work environment and the dynamics of your company. Colleagues outside of your company can offer outside perspective tailored to your particular situation, but not directly tied to your job. Having multiple mentors is a key aspect of building social capital, becoming a leader, and finding opportunities to develop your expertise. You will gain valuable, varied advice and perspective by having multiple people who support you as advisors in different capacities; this is often referred to as developing a personal "board of directors."

In short, mid-level attorneys should be in the process of developing expertise in a chosen area of interest and seeking support and guidance from several sponsors and mentors. Developing expertise can help you become a subject-matter expert at your company and the "go-to" person for questions on that subject. An engaged support system will also provide you with encouragement and guidance throughout your career. When combined, these factors will help make you indispensable and a valuable contributor above and beyond your everyday responsibilities.

Foster relationships within and outside your company

For lawyers making the move from Big Law to all but the largest in-house departments, the ability to simply walk down the hall to talk with attorneys who are experts in a given subject matter suddenly vanishes. You may still have access to experts, but that may cost your company every time you call outside counsel for an opinion. This is one example where the value of relationships with colleagues at other companies becomes evident. Further, in an in-house environment, when you collaborate with individuals across the company and foster positive working relationships, it will make your work more efficient and enjoyable.

The importance of relationships

Most lawyers have heard the adage that people in the legal profession are actually in the “relationship business.” This mantra certainly applies to law firm attorneys in its truest sense, who must develop and retain business. But relationships are just as critical for in-house counsel, even if the value derived from those professional relationships serves a different purpose.

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As an in-house lawyer, a key part of your role is to interact with various stakeholders across the company. In fact, an in-house attorney rarely operates in a silo. Instead, it is often a cross-functional team that works together on a contract, case, or internal investigation. The in-house lawyer often acts as the “quarterback” of a deal, working with people across the company to obtain information, understand decisions, gather approvals, and attain buy-in. In order to complete your own portion of the work, you will need input from multiple groups — the designated business owner, risk management staff, and employees in the product, finance, and operations divisions, to name a few. While these individuals are your colleagues and have an obligation to help you because it is their job, when you are working on a time-sensitive project and need them to assist, it helps to have a solid relationship established ahead of time.

Be a self-starter in building relationships

We all face the tendency to keep our heads down and focus on work to the exclusion of the people we actually work with. The pressure in an in-house environment to turn projects around quickly to meet the demands and timeline of the business can be intense. It is often tempting to close the door and bury yourself in a project, only to realize the end of the day has arrived and you have not spoken to anyone. The reality is some days will be like that, and this is unavoidable. There are periods when this type of focus is required in order to deliver quality work products on time.

When the pace lets up, however, use it as an opportunity to invest in pursuing a different type of goal — building real, substantive relationships with your colleagues and others in the community. The key is to build relationships now, so they are there when you need them. As anyone in a long-term relationship can attest, relationships take work and require ongoing effort and attention in order to thrive. Be proactive and reach out to others; you will likely find they are pleased you did and grateful that someone else is willing to initiate.

Types of relationships

There are several types of intercompany relationships that are valuable and meaningful in the workplace. Consider your needs for each type based upon your role.

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First, build relationships within your own group or functional area. Unless you are a legal department of one, you will need to interact with your legal colleagues, manager, general counsel, and other

lawyers in the company who have functional roles in different departments. Your immediate colleagues — lawyers on your same team or doing similar work — are an invaluable resource. They likely have encountered similar issues and can share resources or refer you to the appropriate stakeholders within the company. Your colleagues will be the individuals with whom you discuss legal matters and brainstorm solutions; they are in the trenches every day right alongside you and know the ins-and-outs of your line of work.

Further, if you work in a mid-size or larger company, your company will likely have lawyers who specialize in a specific subject matter. While the majority of your work may be siloed in one area, from time to time issues will arise that cross paths with other substantive fields. For example, you may be a corporate lawyer focusing on transactions, but a problematic contract dispute appears to be headed toward litigation. Your company will benefit when you strategize with a litigator at your company before the deal ends up in court. A litigator can offer a valuable perspective on the dispute and advise how to solve the issue before it escalates. Similarly, you may be working on a contract with a customer and encounter terms that require language concerning a background check. This would be a good opportunity to visit the employment attorney in your company and discuss the implications.

Next, get to know your clients. Clients are the individuals whom you directly serve at your company. For example, consider speaking with clients on a personal level before a meeting or conference call begins. Understanding your clients will allow you to understand their perspective when you are negotiating or otherwise interacting with them. The relationships you build during the relaxed opportunities when both your interests and your client's interests are aligned will facilitate smoother resolution when interests inevitably clash. When all parties involved know a little about the person they are working with, it will engender more professionalism and respect during difficult conversations.

Connect with others in the community

In addition to developing relationships within your company, mid-level attorneys should also connect with others in the broader community. You can connect with others in a number of ways. For example, find an extracurricular professional activity that is meaningful to you. This will ensure you are enjoying your time while you develop tangible leadership skills, build value for your company, and enhance your reputation in the community.

Choose a form of involvement that speaks to you

As in many aspects of life, you reap what you sow, or, in modern parlance, you get what you put in. There is a correlation between the effort you expend and the value you receive in return. Therefore, choose an organization or cause that you are excited about, and if possible, one that coincides with your personal interests. In addition to all of the other commitments in your life, if you are choosing to spend time with an organization, you will enjoy it more and be willing to give more of your time if it brings you genuine fulfillment.

Some obvious choices that fall squarely within the legal world include your local ACC chapter or bar associations, or local organizations that offer pro bono services in your practice area. You could also volunteer with a local law school or your law school's alumni network to mentor current law students, judge moot court, or become a guest speaker in law school classes.

However, not all forms of involvement need to be so clearly within the legal arena. Many organizations can benefit from the critical thinking and analytical skills that lawyers bring to the table. For example, join a charity or civic organization or serve on the board of a nonprofit that supports a cause you believe in. If you have children, consider volunteering at their school; this offers a unique opportunity to connect with other parents and children at the school while also contributing to the school's success. In addition, local colleges or high schools with pre-law programs are often in desperate need of lawyer mentors, particularly if these schools are not located near a law school or large legal community. You may find great joy in the opportunity to positively influence young people interested in pursuing a legal career.

Representing your company in the community

Involvement in community organizations, particularly one with a legal focus, reflects both on you and on your company. Maintaining professionalism and following through on commitments you have made to the organization will enhance your reputation in the community. You may also collaborate with others on an idea and put the idea into action. Bringing ideas to fruition shows that you are a doer and can be relied upon to follow through with your commitments. Remember that the legal community is closely knit, and lawyers have a penchant for talking. Your involvement in professional activities outside of work will likely make its way back to those you work with. Your reputation outside of work, for better or for worse, can influence how you are perceived at work. Use your extracurricular involvement as an opportunity to build up your professional reputation and help you advance your career goals.

Community connections provide perspective

Connecting with attorneys outside your company provides valuable perspective on your work. As you get to know attorneys in a variety of in-house roles, you will have an opportunity to compare and contrast how other companies operate. Look for opportunities to learn about different legal department sizes and structures and the benefits and drawbacks of each. Learn about the role the legal department plays in different companies, and how this influences an attorney's role. Engaging with others in the community may also help you find a company that shares your same values and energy when and if you decide to make a move in the future. Finding a company that is a "good fit" will make you more engaged in your work and better able to connect with those around you. Working for the right company will also make you proud to represent the company in extracurricular engagements and activities. If you are proud of where you work, others will notice and respect you more.

You can also discuss legal issues and gain insight into how your company and your colleagues' companies handle similar issues. Particularly in a small or solo in-house department, these connections can be invaluable. From these conversations, you can bring best practices back to your company and utilize the lessons learned from others to improve your own effectiveness in your role.

Use your connections to benefit others

Now that you have made all these new connections and found an avenue to get involved in a way that is meaningful to you, remember to help others as well. Look for ways that your actions can benefit those around you. For example, share invitations to events with others who you think will be interested. This is a terrific way to spread the word about worthwhile events in your community, keep in contact with distant connections, or develop new relationships at work. Helping others will likely

bring you a substantial measure of personal satisfaction as well, resulting in a true win-win scenario.

Conclusion

As a mid-level attorney, you should consider a multi-faceted approach to propel your career forward. When you are working deep in the trenches of legal matters at work, and developing expertise in a given area, remember that it takes more than simply being the best attorney, substantively speaking, to move up in an organization. Fortunately, there are steps you can take that are well within your control to drive your career in your desired direction. Becoming an expert and fostering relationships both inside and outside your company will help you build social capital, learn leadership skills, and develop value in your workplace and in your community as a whole.

Jessica Borchers

Senior Attorney

CenturyLink

She currently provides legal support for sales contracting with state and local government customers, and she previously has supported enterprise sales and procurement functions

LaLonnie Gray

Associate

Fisher Philips

LaLonnie Gray is an associate in the Denver office of Fisher Philips where she advises clients on a variety of employment-related issues.