



A Professional Network: Value Beyond the Obvious, Value Throughout Your Career

Career Development



For many in-house lawyers who spent time in private practice, one of the greatest perks of the transition to in-house practice is the elimination of the business development responsibility. Not having to worry about where to find clients, how to cultivate contacts, and whether we are playing the long-game with prospects or just giving out a bit too much free advice, is a great relief. Putting the stress aside, it also means a retreat from the dreaded networking events and awkward pseudo-social interactions.

Or does it?

The value of a professional network cannot be overstated and is an essential part of career growth and assistance throughout one's career. As someone who "grew up" as a lawyer attending bar association events and has been known to serve on a law school reunion planning committee or two, I have learned to appreciate the opportunity to get to know and learn from other attorneys.

I was fortunate because, in my law firm days, I was encouraged to get involved in activities that interested me rather than those someone else thought would be beneficial. This meant I was able to enjoy the work and find meaning in it and, in turn, make genuine connections with those outside the workplace. Then, as now, I find these relationships not merely helpful but sustaining.

Professional networks provide work-related resources

Putting aside the personal element, many organized (as well as informal) groups provide excellent referral sources, model documents, and job postings. In addition, having a reliable network allows you to stay on top of best practices in your industry and across different business types.

By having credible information about how other organizations address common issues, we are better resourced internally. Although we want to be innovative and cutting-edge, sometimes we are asked by our internal clients to provide a middle ground or to help them avoid taking an outsized risk. Adopting a guideline provided by someone from a network can be a time-saving solution. For example, during the pandemic, we have been asked to provide information about how others are handling issues such as return-to-work, vaccines, and safety.

When things are their worst at work, knowing you are not just part of your organization but part of a legal community, alongside other honorable lawyers, can be what keeps you in practice and gives you hope for a new opportunity that will be fulfilling.

A network can be a sounding board

When thinking about how we manage our careers, a professional network provides a sounding board. Having trusted colleagues outside of your organization can be a way to get advice on how to negotiate your compensation, how and when to make a career move, and whether the experiences you have in the workplace are common.

Being a lawyer can be draining and frustrating. When things are their worst at work, knowing you are not just part of your organization but part of a legal community, alongside other honorable lawyers, can be what keeps you in practice and gives you hope for a new opportunity that will be fulfilling.

Choose or build a network that includes peers, role models, and mentees

Many lawyers gravitate toward others at their practice level and build their networks laterally. And there are so many benefits to having a network with a number of peers. You may be at similar levels of expertise and have common concerns about your career trajectory.

You may also be going through lifecycle events at the same time and it may be helpful to find out what resources are available for professionals balancing work with child or elder care.

It's also critically important to reach out to those in different spots in their careers. Network members may be able to provide you with perspectives that help you do everything from find a new position to be a better supervisor.

By volunteering in a professional organization, you are able to demonstrate your attitude, reliability, and competence. In turn, other volunteers get to know your work ethic and may provide a reference for you or have you top of mind when they learn of an employment opportunity. Also, it can be very satisfying to help others connect with potential employers finding ways to promote more junior lawyers.



It's never too late to build or expand a network

Many lawyers realize they need resources later in their careers. Perhaps when they are facing a professional crisis, their companies are sold, or they find themselves in a new industry or geographic location. The unknown can be overwhelming. You've toiled away at your desk for years and now you are starting at square one. The good news is that whether it is ACC, your law school, or another organization, you will not be turned away.

You can find opportunities that match your personality, expertise, and availability. Whether you are most comfortable giving a speech, writing an article, mentoring a junior lawyer, developing a library of model materials, or mingling at a social event, there is some way to connect. Find the activities and people who reflect your interests and values. From there, you will be best able to position yourself for success.

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