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### How to Be a Star Performer in the Legal World Jobs

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## How to Be a Star Performer in the Legal World

Successful scientists were found to have adopted nine work strategies. They'll be just as helpful in your legal career.

**P**rofessional athletes who find themselves no longer affiliated with a team, whether by choice or not, go into the market as free agents. They hope to be picked up by a new team and to sign a favorable contract within the free agency-based marketplace.

During their free agency status, athletes make known the strengths, abilities, and talents they can bring to a new team. Most professional athletes expect to be free agents several times during their professional careers. They prepare for free agency by maintaining their skills and fitness and by staying informed, at least through their agents, about budget, personnel, and other business issues of their sport that will affect contract negotiations.

Until recently, few lawyers were “free agents.” Stability prevailed. A lawyer tended to stay with the same law firm for an entire career. Today, however, the average lawyer changes jobs seven times in a career. This frequency is likely to increase as the legal profession becomes even more fluid in the years ahead.

We all want to be in control of our career. To do that, it's important to be an effective free agent in the legal marketplace. That means knowing how to be a star performer.

### 9 Strategies of Star Performers

What makes a lawyer, law student, or any brain-powered worker a star performer? Turns out, it's not grades, IQ, or other cognitive differences. It's nine work strategies. We know this from a study of scientists.

For much of the 20th century, Bell Laboratories, the research labs of the telecommunications giant AT&T, was one of the premier research laboratories in the world. It counted multiple Nobel Prize winners among its scientists and had numerous successful patents and inventions. To help ensure Bell Labs' continued success, AT&T hired Robert E. Kelley, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University and an expert in industrial psychology, to study and assess Bell Labs scientists. The Bell Labs study of 200 scientists stands as one of the most thorough analyses of

excellence in the workplace. Its conclusion? “It isn't what stars have in their heads that makes them stand out from the pack. It's how they use what they have.”

The Bell Labs study found clear differences between work strategies of the star and average performers. The star performers used nine work strategies the average performers didn't. These are, ranked in order of importance:

1. **Initiative**
2. **Networking**
3. **Self-management**
4. **Perspective**
5. **Followership**
6. **Leadership**
7. **Teamwork**
8. **Organizational savvy**
9. **Show-and-tell**

### More surprising findings

Additional findings from the study provide more insights:

- Strategies of star performers are closely related; none exists without using the others.

- Average performers are aware of the key work strategies but misunderstand them. For example, average performers view initiative as coming up with ideas to get themselves noticed. Star performers view initiative as coming up with ideas that benefit their organization.
- Star-performer strategies can be taught. When average performers practice them, their performance increases.
- Star performers work fewer hours than average performers.
- Star performers use the nine work strategies to improve their quality of life as well as their performance at work.

The star performer strategies are equally applicable to the legal profession. Here's how you can demonstrate initiative, the first star performer strategy, at various stages of your law school and legal career.

### How to show initiative in law school

- Seek out mentors, whether professors or practicing attorneys. Everyone enjoys helping eager law students. Take advantage of this willingness.
- Develop professors as mentors by doing well in class, speaking up during class, and visiting with professors before or after class. Go visit professors' offices. Correspond with them about course coverage.
- Register for courses taught by respected adjunct faculty who are also practicing members of the bar or bench. Get to know them. Each one is a potential mentor, contact, or reference for employment.
- Attend programs in law school featuring practicing lawyers or judges as speakers. Go up after the program, introduce yourself, and thank the speaker for coming. Such courtesies mean a lot. Chances are, the speaker will remember you the next time you meet.

### How to show initiative in a clerkship

- Treat your summer clerkship as one long job interview. Be on your toes at all times.

- Ask lawyers you're working with on a project if you can attend scheduled court hearings on the matter. Get your other work done at night or on weekends if necessary to free up your time to attend.
- Take paper and pens with you when you meet with any lawyer who's giving you a new assignment. Take notes.
- When given an assignment, always ask, "When do you need this?" If you can't make the deadline, it's better to say so up front.
- Be polite to all staff. Be polite to all staff. Be polite to all staff.
- Get to know people in the office. Develop such conversation starters as, "How was your weekend?" Follow up in later conversations. ("How did your daughter's ball game go?") Don't be intrusive, but show interest.
- If you go to meals with lawyers in the office, don't order spaghetti; don't order an alcoholic drink at noon; don't order alcohol after work unless the attorneys order alcohol; don't drink to excess. Ever. If you don't know all of your table manners, learn them. Ask your parents or consult YouTube.
- Make it easy for lawyers in the office to give you feedback. After each project, ask: "Do you have any suggestions on how I can improve?"

### How to show initiative after a clerkship

- After you've returned to classes, look for opportunities to stay in touch with the lawyers you worked with during your clerkship. For example, send an occasional email attaching an article of interest.
- Offer to work on projects from the office even after you've returned to school. Don't over-commit or take on more than you can handle. But if you can work on small assignments during the school year, do so. Such projects give you opportunities to build relationships with the lawyers from the office.
- Offer to do projects, especially if they're small, on a volunteer basis. Your willingness to do so signals

your interest in the law and the office, as well as your industriousness and work ethic.

- If a hearing or other court matter is scheduled on a case you worked on after you've returned to school, ask the lawyer you worked with if you may attend. Don't skip classes, but if you can attend, do so.

### How to show initiative as a new associate

- Look for opportunities to present an internal continuing legal education session or presentation. As you handle every matter, be thinking about how you'd prepare and present a CLE on the topic. There are many such "recycling" opportunities on any matter you work on. Keep a CLE file as you work on cases.
- Get a proofing buddy. Offer to proof memos for other attorneys. Ask others to proof your work.
- Send follow-up information. Look for opportunities in conversations to follow up by sending an email with a helpful link, whether on topics of work or pleasure.
- Offer to meet with the high-maintenance client everyone tries to dodge. Your colleagues will be grateful to you and will view you as "taking one for the team." Structure meetings or phone conversations with these difficult clients with an exit strategy, such as a pre-arranged phone call requiring your presence.
- Offer to help with firm recruiting. Remember: It's wise to "pay your dues" by assisting in recruiting efforts when your life is relatively uncomplicated.
- Look for unmet needs in your office. These may include establishing and maintaining a document bank for your office, firm, or clients; creating, assisting with, or revising a firm blog; or generating a closed online community for clients. ■

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