



# So You're a Lawyer— Now What?

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**W**elcome to the second edition of “Redlines and Deadlines.” By now, you’ve made it through law school, conquered the bar exam, and likely seen firsthand just how little the law practice of real life resembles the law practice of dramas like *Law and Order* and *Suits*. So, now what?

It’s natural to feel a mix of emotions as you start your career in the legal field. No worries—we’ve got you covered! Whether you’re gearing up for your first day as a practicing attorney or looking to enhance your professional journey, this guide offers 10 practical tips to help you navigate your new career and build your professional reputation.

## **1. Prepare for Your First Day at Your New Job**

Preparation is the key to a smooth first day. Before you start, familiarize yourself with the firm or organization where you’ll be working. Research its practice areas, recent cases or projects, and key individuals. Review any materials provided by your employer, such as employee

handbooks or orientation packets. Having a solid understanding of your new workplace will help ease any first-day jitters and demonstrate your enthusiasm for joining the team.

## **2. Arrive Early and Prepared**

Plan to arrive early on your first day to allow ample time for any unforeseen delays. Being punctual shows your reliability and commitment to your new role. Bring essential items such as a notebook, a pen, identification, and any paperwork or documents requested by your employer.

It’s also a good idea to keep a pen and notebook on your person throughout the day (and throughout the rest of your career), especially when taking instructions from assigning attorneys. Legal professionals often speak quickly and provide detailed instructions, and having a pen and notebook handy allows you to quickly jot down important information. This ensures that you capture all relevant details and can refer back to them as needed when completing your tasks. Additionally, taking notes demonstrates your attentiveness and professionalism, as well

as your commitment to executing assignments accurately. By being prepared with the necessary tools, you’ll be better equipped to tackle your responsibilities and make a positive impression on your colleagues from day one.

## **3. Be Trustworthy**

Building trust is paramount to your success in the legal profession, especially as a young attorney. Senior attorneys and clients alike rely on your integrity, professionalism, and competence to handle complex legal matters. Establishing your trustworthiness involves consistently delivering on your commitments, maintaining confidentiality, upholding ethical standards, and being detail oriented.

Attention to detail is indeed a cornerstone of trust-building within the legal field. Whether you’re meticulously reviewing contracts for accuracy, analyzing case law with precision, or drafting intricate legal documents, a keen eye for detail is invaluable. It’s a skill that adds value to your team from day one. While you may delve into the substantive aspects of law later on, your focus on the finer points can

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significantly enhance the quality of your work. Your ability to identify nuances, catch potential issues, and produce error-free documents not only bolsters your credibility but also fosters trust among colleagues and clients. However, it's crucial to understand that attention to detail goes beyond mere perfectionism—it's about ensuring the integrity and reliability of your work product. A simple misspelling in a party name or a typo in the first line of a document can cast doubt on the entirety of your work, whether it's viewed by a client, opposing counsel, or the court. By consistently demonstrating meticulous attention to detail, you reinforce your reputation as a reliable and trustworthy legal professional, earning the confidence of those you work with.

On the other hand, owning up to your mistakes also plays a critical role in building trust. As a new attorney, it's inevitable that you will encounter challenges and make errors along the way. However, how you handle those mistakes speaks volumes about your character. When you make a misstep, take ownership of it and strive to rectify the situation promptly and transparently. By exhibiting humility, honesty, and a willingness to learn from your mistakes, you show that you are committed to delivering the highest standards of professionalism and ethical conduct. This level of accountability not only fosters trust among your colleagues and clients but also reinforces your reputation as a dependable and trustworthy legal professional. As you navigate your legal career, remember that admitting fault and taking corrective action when necessary is not a sign of weakness, but rather a demonstration of strength and integrity that ultimately enhances your credibility and fosters stronger relationships within the legal community.

In addition to attention to detail and being accountable, it's essential to trust yourself as a smart and capable attorney. Recognize your strengths, acknowledge your achievements, and have confidence in your ability to tackle challenges and overcome obstacles. Trusting yourself instills confidence in others and reinforces your credibility as a competent and reliable legal professional. By embracing your intelligence, skills, and potential, you'll inspire trust in your colleagues, clients, and yourself,

paving the way for a successful and fulfilling legal career.

#### **4. Introduce Yourself and Build Relationships**

Your first day is an excellent opportunity to start building relationships with your colleagues and support staff. Introduce yourself to as many people as you can, with a firm handshake and warm smile. Take note of people's names and showcase your attentiveness and respect by recalling names and addressing people personally. Be approachable, friendly, and open to connecting with others.

Since the pandemic, remote work has become increasingly common. If your workplace has a hybrid policy, make an effort to spend time in the office or find alternative ways to interact with your colleagues, such as meeting for coffee, lunch, or happy hour. Ensure you're not missing out on valuable opportunities to connect and collaborate with your coworkers. Building rapport early on will foster a supportive and collaborative work environment, which is essential for your success as a new attorney.

Additionally, it's important to recognize the value of support staff, such as paralegals or legal assistants. They often possess valuable insights into the firm's operations, procedures, and client matters. By establishing a cooperative relationship with them, you can improve your work product while demonstrating your appreciation for their contributions to the team. In the legal profession, success and teamwork go hand in hand. Leveraging the expertise of support staff can be instrumental in achieving your professional goals.

#### **5. Seek Feedback and Guidance**

Don't shy away from seeking feedback and guidance from senior attorneys and mentors. Solicit constructive criticism on your work product and performance, as it provides a valuable opportunity for improvement. A willingness to learn from your experiences is an essential component of a growth mindset, which is integral to your development as a successful lawyer. Remember, it's all right not to have all the answers immediately. Building strong relationships with mentors and advisors is key—these connections

may very well become long-lasting sources of support and guidance as you navigate your legal career. These relationships provide a space where you can vent frustrations and work through challenges, ultimately helping you grow both personally and professionally along the way.

#### **6. Listen and Learn**

Approach your first day with a mindset of curiosity and openness to learning. Pay close attention during orientation sessions, meetings, and introductions, absorbing as much information as possible. Take notes on firm/organization policies, procedures, and expectations, and don't hesitate to ask questions if something is unclear. Your willingness to listen and learn will demonstrate your commitment to your role and your eagerness to contribute to the team.

Moreover, it's crucial to recognize the importance of speaking up and asking questions when you encounter uncertainty. As a new attorney, you're embarking on a journey of continuous learning, and seeking clarification is an essential part of that process. On the other hand, before asking a question, make an effort to figure it out on your own. Research the issue, review relevant materials, and consider possible solutions. You may be surprised how many things are "googleable."

If you're still unsure, don't hesitate to voice your concerns or ask for further explanation. Your colleagues and supervisors are there to support you and help you succeed, and they'll likely appreciate your proactive approach to understanding your responsibilities. Remember, asking questions demonstrates your commitment to delivering high-quality work and ensures that you're on the right track. So embrace the opportunity to seek guidance and clarification—it's a sign of strength, not weakness.

#### **7. Be Proactive and Volunteer**

Demonstrate your initiative and enthusiasm by volunteering for assignments and projects on your first day. Express your interest in getting involved in various aspects of the firm's practice areas and initiatives. Seek opportunities to assist senior attorneys with their caseloads or contribute to ongoing projects. By being proactive and engaged from the outset, you'll showcase

your value as a motivated and committed team member.

Embracing this proactive approach is particularly important for junior attorneys, who often grapple with uncertainty regarding the duration and significance of their assigned tasks within the broader context of the legal practice. One strategy to navigate this challenge is to adopt the principle of “under-promise and over-deliver.” This approach entails setting realistic expectations regarding the time frame or outcome of a task and then surpassing those expectations through diligent effort and superior results. With limited experience, junior attorneys may struggle to accurately gauge the time required for tasks or their overall impact. However, by embracing the under-promise and over-deliver mindset, you can effectively manage expectations, communicate transparently about your capabilities and workload, and ultimately deliver a work product that exceeds expectations.

### 8. Become a Master of Organization and Time Management

Being organized is essential for success as a new attorney. Start by organizing your workspace, ensuring that it’s conducive to productivity and efficiency. Keep your desk clear of clutter, creating designated areas for different tasks and documents. Additionally, establish a system for managing your digital files, such as organizing them into folders and using descriptive file names. This will help you locate documents quickly when needed and avoid wasting time searching for information.

When receiving assignments, take the time to review them carefully and create a plan of action. Break down complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps, and set deadlines for each stage of the project. Keep track of your progress and deadlines using a planner, calendar, or notetaking software such as Microsoft OneNote.

Maintaining a well-organized schedule is also crucial. Prioritize your tasks based on urgency and importance, and allocate time for both work and personal commitments. By staying organized and managing your time effectively, you’ll be better equipped to meet deadlines, avoid last-minute stress, and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Overall, being organized not only enhances your productivity but also demonstrates your professionalism and attention to detail. It instills confidence in your abilities and fosters trust among your colleagues and supervisors. As you embark on your legal career, prioritize organization as a cornerstone of your success.


### 9. Maintain Professionalism and Confidentiality

As a licensed attorney, you are held to the highest standards of professionalism, integrity, and confidentiality. Respect client confidentiality and avoid discussing sensitive matters outside of work. Adhere to firm policies and professional ethics at all times and conduct yourself with professionalism and discretion in your interactions with clients, colleagues, and third parties. Your adherence to ethical standards will build trust and credibility with clients and colleagues alike.

### 10. Reflect and Plan for the Future

At the end of your first day, take 30 minutes to reflect on your experiences and accomplishments. Celebrate your achievements and acknowledge any challenges you may have encountered. Use this reflection period as an opportunity to jot down goals for your future development and career advancement. For short-term goals, identify areas where you excel and areas where you can improve, and develop a plan to address them in the coming days and weeks. For long-term goals, write down specific 3-, 5-, and 10-year plans. By setting clear goals, you’ll be better positioned to achieve success in your legal career. Remember, it’s a long career.

### Conclusion

Your first day as a licensed attorney marks the beginning of an exciting and fulfilling journey in the legal profession. By following these practical tips and approaches, you can navigate your first day with confidence and set the stage for a successful and rewarding career. Remember to approach each day with enthusiasm, curiosity, and a willingness to learn and grow. With dedication, perseverance, and a commitment to excellence, you’ll make a lasting impact as a trusted advocate and advisor in the legal community. Best of luck on your journey as a new attorney! 



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## CALL FOR INTERVIEWEES!

We’re looking for attorneys to share their stories in future “Redlines and Deadlines” articles. If you have experiences, insights, or strategies that you’d like to share with readers, please let us know. We welcome stories about finding your legal niche, excelling in legal research, honing your writing skills, navigating courtroom dynamics, building strong client relationships, mastering negotiation techniques, achieving work-life balance, promoting diversity and inclusion, upholding ethical standards, developing business acumen, or any other topic that might provide value to our readers. Your unique perspective can inspire and guide those who are just starting their legal careers.

To volunteer to be interviewed, please reach out to Jacqlin Davis at jacqlin.davis@dgslaw.com with a brief overview of your experiences and the topics you’re passionate about. Together, we can build a stronger, more informed legal community in Colorado.