Personal User Manual

The Quiet Power Move for Junior Associates

BY NYSSA P. CHOPRA

We spend much of our legal careers decoding how others work—partner preferences, client quirks, supervision styles, even the best time to ask for feedback. But what if we stopped guessing and started building a system to manage communications, expectations, and working styles?

Enter: the personal user manual.

Borrowed from the tech world's approach to team dynamics and onboarding, personal user manuals are now being adopted across industries as a way for professionals to lead with clarity, reduce friction and misunderstandings, and build psychological safety.

At its core, it's a simple but powerful document that answers one question: "How does this person work—and how can I work best with them?"

Law firms are hierarchical, fast-paced, and often opaque. There's little room—or little time—for supervising attorneys to spell out their preferences, and even less space for junior attorneys to ask. But that's exactly why this tool is so valuable. It offers a roadmap for navigating unspoken expectations and working relationships more effectively. It's as much for the junior associates as it is for the supervising attorneys.

I encourage everyone who is in a position of leadership to fill it out—including mid-level associates, senior associates, and partners. You may already be tracking this information in your head, but this is a way to record it in a practical format. For junior associates (and even summer associates), this is your opportunity to shine by showing initiative, being proactive, and making your supervising attorney's (and your own) life easier.

Why This Is a Power Move for Junior Associates

Law firms reward those who anticipate what needs to get done instead of those who wait to be told what to do. That's especially true in high-pressure, hierarchical systems where supervisors are often managing multiple clients, matters, and associates. They rarely pause to explain their preferences.

That's where the personal user manual becomes a quiet power move.

You can create your own version for each supervising attorney based on direct experience, what you learn from other associates, and even by asking your supervising attorney, if appropriate. Think of it as a working document—a personal cheat sheet that helps you decode each supervisor's preferences, anticipate expectations, and avoid preventable mistakes.

Over time, this personal reference becomes one of your most valuable internal tools.

Here's what it gives you:

- **Clarity:** You won't be guessing what your supervising attorney wants—you'll proactively figure it out.
- **Efficiency:** You'll spend less time redoing work and more time refining it.
- **Trust:** You'll earn credibility faster by getting it right the first time.
- **Confidence**: You'll feel more in control, even when expectations are unspoken.
- **Professional equity:** You'll start developing the skills that senior associates and partners actually notice: judgment, maturity, and initiative.

As you become more senior, these internal user manuals become even more valuable:

- You'll be able to help junior associates work more effectively with specific partners.
- You'll build a mental library of partner preferences and styles across teams.
- You'll become someone who anticipates needs and solves problems before they escalate.

And because most juniors don't work with just one partner, keeping a running document for everyone you work with makes you sharper and more prepared, especially

Borrowed from the tech world's approach to team dynamics and onboarding, personal user manuals are now being adopted across industries as a way for professionals to lead with clarity, reduce friction and misunderstandings, and build psychological safety.

when you're pulled back onto matters after time away.

How to Build a Personal User Manual (Without Overstepping)

You can start building a supervising attorney's user manual from day one. Use these three strategies to start:

1. Observe Closely

Notice how your supervisor assigns work, gives feedback, formats emails, or redlines documents. *What do they emphasize? What frustrates them? What earns praise?*

2. Ask Mid-Level Associates

Mid-level associates are often the best source of intel on supervising attorneys. A quick, casual ask about how someone likes to receive drafts, provide feedback, and so on can make a world of difference and save you a lot of stress.

3. Ask Strategically and Directly

When appropriate, ask: "Would it help to review an outline before I draft the full brief?" "What's the best way to update you on progress for this matter?" Framing these as ways to be more efficient—not personality questions—shows maturity.

What to Document

The personal user manual isn't a personality test or biography—it's a quick reference guide that should focus on operational preferences. Keep it short, clear, and practical. Some helpful categories to include are:

1. Communication Patterns

- Preferred communication method (email, chat, in-person)
- Typical response time and availability
- Email formatting
- Urgency definitions and escalation procedures

2. Work Product Expectations

- Submission format (Word, PDF, body of email, shared document)
- Preferred research depth, citation style, brief length
- Lead time for review

3. Feedback and Supervision Style

- How they give feedback (track changes, verbal, clean versions)
- Frequency of check-ins
- Level of detail they expect in updates

4. Project Management

- Preferred method for deadline updates
- How to raise priority conflicts
- Notice period for new deliverables

TEMPLATE

Here's a simple template to help you build a personal user manual for each of your supervising attorneys (or for yourself if you're in a position of leadership):

[NAME]

Personal User Manual

INTRODUCTION

- [ROLE] in [PRACTICE GROUP NAME]
- Been at the firm since [DATE]
- Preferred Name:
- Focus areas:
- Working/collaboration style:

COMMUNICATION

- What mode of communication (email, chat, etc.) do you prefer . . .
  - For a quick question?
  - For something that requires more thought or needs your review?
  - For feedback on a matter?
  - For an urgent matter?
- Are there certain hours in a day that you'll be unavailable?
- How do you like to handle questions during busy periods?
- Are you okay if someone puts time on your calendar without checking with you first?
- Do you have a particular email style?
  - Should they be formatted in a certain way?
  - Do you prefer context upfront or bottom-line-first in emails/updates?
  - What is the best way for someone to get your attention (e.g., should someone put URGENT in the subject line)?
  - Do you have a preference for follow-ups/reminders (frequency, mode, etc.)?
- What is your supervision style?
  - When sending you work for review, what context should I include in the email?
  - Do you want the draft in the body of the email or on a Google doc?
  - How much in advance do you want it?

FEEDBACK

- How do you like to give feedback?
- What is the best way for the associate to initiate the conversation?

GENERAL

- What is your general approach to work, client management, etc.?
- What does "urgent" mean to you, e.g., same day, within hours, etc.?
- What builds and erodes your trust?
- What is something that people misunderstand about you?
- What's your philosophy on work-life boundaries for associates?
- Anything else someone should know when working with you?

Remember this is just a starting point—feel free to tailor this to your needs and preferences.

To keep your personal user manual relevant, update your notes as you go. Create a checklist and review it before sending any assignment.

The Bottom Line for Junior Associates

Great associates don't just do great work; they deliver it in the way their supervisor wants it. A personal user manual isn't about decoding personalities; it's about understanding preferences that affect work quality and efficiency.

This system helps you avoid preventable mistakes, create stronger relationships, and build professional confidence faster. You don't need a perfect memory; you need a good system, and this is it.

A Final Note for Supervising Attorneys

Partners, senior associates, and mid-levels: consider creating your own personal user manual. It doesn't need to be elaborate—just a few clear notes on how you like to communicate, review work, and give feedback.

This small up-front investment:

- reduces confusion,
- saves time,
- minimizes rework,
- encourages efficiency,
- accelerates trust, and
- empowers junior associates to contribute more from day one.

Clarity doesn't slow things down; it speeds everyone up. CL

Nyssa P. Chopra is a technology, privacy, and trust and safety attorney at Perkins Coie LLP, where she advises some of the world's largest online platforms on data disclosure, cross-border data governance, child safety, AI governance, international human rights, and platform liability. She is also co-chair of the Data Privacy and Security Committee at the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA) and Denver City Lead at the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity (LCLD). Previously, she was corporate counsel at Microsoft and has held fellowships with the Aspen Institute, LCLD, World Affairs Council, and Washington State Bar Association—nyssapchopra@gmail.com; nyssapchopra.com.