

Build the Career You Want— Your friends will help you do it

When young lawyers ask what I wish I'd learned early in my career, I don't talk about substantive law or legal skills—as critical as those are. Rather, it's the importance of a broad network of great relationships with great lawyers. Luckily, I stumbled into having so many wonderful friends who believe in me and only realized a ways down the road how important that is.

Whether your goal is to be a judge, GC, trial lawyer, rainmaker, or just to have a reliable paycheck while you do interesting work with nice people, it's a lot easier if folks who think you're awesome are looking out for you, telling you about opportunities, or talking you up when you're not in the room. And when you fail—and we all fail at one time or another—your friends will have your back.

On the other hand, you can do what most lawyers do: focus on doing excellent work and—when you're off-the-clock—chill with your close friends and loved ones; then, just wait to be tapped for the opportunities you've earned. That strategy will probably keep you from getting fired as long as your employer is doing well and you don't step on any powerful toes. And you might even luck into a good job. But the odds of building the career you really want? From my vantage point mentoring scores of lawyers and having navigated the highs and lows of a 30-year career—not so great.

Let's say you've already found your dream job as an in-house lawyer for some super cool company and have no aspirations to move up the corporate ladder. What if the company goes bankrupt or merges with a larger one and your job is redundant? What if the economy craters and your job is eliminated? What if suddenly you've been assigned an incredibly complex matter and have no idea where to start? Or more likely, you've got a good job but would be open to opportunities for a better one—whatever “better” means to you?

You can build the career you want—and even capitalize on wonderful opportunities that take you in an unanticipated but exciting new direction—if you have a powerful network of professional relationships.

Uh-oh. I said it. “Network.” Sounds like that dreaded word, “networking.”

Most lawyers loathe networking. I do, and I'm lousy at it. Maybe you've got the same thought bubbles: “It's uncomfortable.” “I'm no good at small talk.” “Selling myself feels gross and I feel like an idiot giving an ‘elevator speech.’” Yet, if you see me in certain environments, I look some kind of networking wonder. It's an illusion. I'm good at two things that *look* like networking: hanging out with my friends, and welcoming guests to my home. I'm betting that however much you dislike networking, you're good at those things too.

Here's how it works. Pick an organization or two with missions you are passionate about and have as members people who do what you do or want to do, or who you want to meet. Show up. Volunteer. Do what you say you'll do. (This one is such a simple yet powerful thing, but most lawyers are flakes in a volunteer role) Let's say you're not a people person—you just like to research and write. Well, volunteer to do legal updates or produce a newsletter. What if the organization doesn't do updates or a newsletter? Find the right person, recruit a team, and volunteer to head up the project. As you do these things, you'll naturally interact with other folks, and demonstrate that you're a leader who gets things done. Guess what? You've got a network.

Now, when you attend (in person or virtually) events of that organization, assume the role of host. Picture this. You walk into a nice home filled with people you don't know, cocktails in hand, chatting and laughing and having a good time. You feel awkward because you don't know anyone; everyone seems to be talking to someone and you are not good at breaking into conversations. That's definitely me (the guy in the back, looking busy checking email on his phone, LOL!). Now flip the image. It's *your* home. You've invited a bunch of people you want to get to know, but haven't met. You welcome your guests. You point out the bar and tell them the shrimp cocktail is delicious, and ask if they had any trouble finding the place or if there's someone in particular they want to meet. You are a host. Well, once you get active in an organization, make yourself a host!

I've been on the boards of several legal diversity organizations and multiple community non-profits. For every one except the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms, I was invited to join the board within a year of first showing up at an event—even though for each of them board seats open infrequently at best. NAMWOLF took about a year and a half. How the heck did that happen? I showed up. I volunteered for the hard jobs. I did what I said I'd do. And once I had my bearings, I acted as a host—recruiting and welcoming others, connecting them, looking for opportunities to help them achieve their goals. Not surprisingly, I have loads of friends in these organizations who look out for me, share opportunities, talk me up when I'm not in the room, and otherwise have my back. (Full disclosure: there are also a few folks who aren't quite talking me up behind my back; I can live with that.)

The key here is to make friends and then *serve* your friends. When they get an award, **you** post it on LinkedIn, even if they are your “competitors.” Better yet, **you** nominate your competitor friend for the award! If they want to meet a potential client, **you** introduce them. When their name comes up, extol their virtues. If you hear of a job or speaking opportunity that doesn't interest you, take a moment to think of who it would mean something to and pitch them for it. Look out for your friends. And when you're not looking, they will look out for you. THAT is the most important factor in building the career you want.