

BE VALUABLE: **5 tips for Standing Out Above the Crowd**

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Do you ever have those moments where the light bulb inside your head turns on so bright that you (literally) think your head is glowing? I do. Not very often, mind you, but I do have them.

My most recent “light bulb” moment came during my first week back from 3 months of maternity leave. I was busy catching up with all of my colleagues, responding to e-mails and cleaning out my inbox when I realized that many tasks/projects were put on hold pending my return. I was confused because there was a paralegal from another office filling in for me while I was out. A very bright, capable paralegal that could have completed these tasks/projects with zero difficulty. So why didn't the attorneys I work for have her work on these matters? Why did they decide that these tasks/projects could wait? Being the outspoken person that I am, I point blank asked them why and their answers were refreshingly honest. They valued me. My work ethic. My ability to consistently produce quality work. They knew I would do it and do it right; therefore, the work could wait.

Now, I know what you're thinking. *You work for lawyers?* Indeed, I do. I am lucky to work for two of the nicest people in Charlotte...and they happen to be lawyers. I have worked for monsters. We all have. But years ago, I had another light bulb moment where I realized that I was **valuable** and that I didn't have to work for tyrants. In short, here are my 5 tips for becoming valuable in your career.

1. Ask for help

This concept was slow to catch on with me. If I ask for help, I am showing weakness, right? WRONG. Asking for help to meet a deadline or complete a task shows that you see the bigger picture, that you are a multi-tasker who can work with others and will do whatever necessary to get the job done. Think of it this way: Would you rather miss an important deadline because you were overwhelmed or meet a deadline because you reached out and asked for assistance? Which approach do you think the lawyers would appreciate?

2. Educate yourself

I happen to be in a very technology driven arena of law (IP Litigation), and I happen to be a tech nerd when it comes to legal software. I love them. Can't get enough (seriously). And it

never ceases to amaze me how many of my colleagues shy away, er, RUN away from opportunities to learn new technologies. Why? It's a chance to better yourself, bring more to the table, and boost your resume. Last time I checked, these weren't bad things for your career. And I'm not suggesting to merely learn new technologies. How about learning a different area of law? Does your firm have a real estate or bankruptcy practice? The next time you're looking for work, think outside the box. Challenge yourself and learn something new. Might open doors for you and/or create a new career path.

3. Understand the task/assignment/project

Miscommunication is a horrible thing. How many times have you given explicit, clearly stated instructions and they aren't followed? So frustrating – right? I have found in my 15 years of being a paralegal that lawyers do this all the time. They think they are giving you such detailed instructions and they might be – but what good are those instructions if you don't *understand* them? Don't be afraid to ask for clarification. They would much rather you ask and complete the task/project correctly, than assume and produce work product that isn't what they wanted. Make them take the time up front to help you understand what it is they want. Everyone will be happier in the end!

4. Always tell the Truth; Be Accountable

This is a great life practice, not just a work practice. If you don't know how to do something, admit it. Don't go back to your desk and panic over how to start the task/project or where to begin looking for the "how" to do it. Tell the lawyer that you've never been asked to do this and that you will learn how, but it may take a little longer than usual. Oftentimes, the lawyer can point you in the right direction, saving you hours of fretting. If a mistake is made, own up to it! We are all human and we all make mistakes. There is nothing more terrifying than going into a partner's office and looking them in the eye and saying "I messed up". I have found that they don't yell, they don't fire you, they respect you for admitting the mistake and then ask "how are we going to fix this"? The anticipation of owning up to the mistake is (more often than not) worse than the reaction from the attorney.

5. Boundaries (Set them)

Easier said than done – right? In this world of blackberries, iPhones, Droids, laptops, iPads, Citrix, etc.. it makes it so easy to stay connected. And too easy to forget to *disconnect*. My attorneys appreciate that I respond to emails at night, but they don't expect it – there's a difference. It is OK to go home and cook dinner, do laundry and watch tv and put the phone down for 3 hours. Really, it is. Promise. Because guess what? The lawyers have to eat dinner and do other things at home. They too have lives outside of the office. Setting boundaries at the office is important as well. If you are working on a project and need to assure there are no interruptions, close the door. Send all calls to voicemail. Minimize your email screen so new

emails coming in won't divert your attention away from the task at hand. Don't have an office? Book a conference room and go "hide out" for a while to focus on your project. Again, sometimes easier said than done, but it can be done!

Lawyers are opportunists. They prey on weakness. I'm convinced that most of them got beat up on the playground as a kid and became lawyers to show the world that they can no longer be bullied. Do not allow them to bully you. Be confident. Know that you are an important, contributing part of the team. Do not allow anyone to make you feel inferior. Your knowledge and experience are valuable. And so are you.