

So You're No Longer a Young Lawyer?

What Are You Now?

By Ryan Plecha



Many articles, events, and resources are dedicated to young lawyers as they transition from law students to the practice of law—and rightfully so. On the flip side, and what often goes without much mention, is how to transition from being a young lawyer to a lawyer not defined by age or experience and joining what has been referred to as the “regular bar,” “big bar,” or “grown-up bar.” Is there such a transition?

The strict constructionist view dictates the answer is yes; the State Bar of Michigan defines Young Lawyers Section (YLS) members as new lawyers who are age 36 or younger or have been admitted to practice law for five years or less. All attorneys licensed in the state fitting that criteria are automatically members of the section. YLS membership provides newly minted lawyers with an instant connection to other young lawyers, networking events, resources, and a sense of community. But what's next? Answering that complex question, or at least trying to do so, is the purpose of this article.

I contacted many former YLS Executive Council members and past section chairs for their insights on the topic and received great information and advice. The responses I received

can be separated into three categories: the need for continued professional growth and development, the need to stay active and involved in local or topic-specific bar associations, and the need to take time for oneself.

Continued professional growth and development

I'm not sure who said it or where I heard it, but the following adage rings true and relevant: lawyers *practice* law because it can never be perfected. This seems particularly true for those recently moving beyond their time as a young lawyer because:

- The days of the Socratic method, case briefing, and IRAC (Issue, Rule, Application, and Conclusion) from law school are fading memories, albeit still stress-inducing.



- The nerves, anxiety, and fear of practicing law have started to subside, but so have some of the energy and adrenaline.
- Cases are becoming more complex.
- Responsibilities are increasing and becoming more demanding.
- Generally speaking, you're dealing with new issues, changed laws, or new practice areas.

These reasons stress the importance of continuing legal education. The no-longer-young lawyers must seek out mentors, seminars, and practice materials on their own. The YLS community support, programming, and email blasts have stopped, and it's up to each individual to pursue his or her own professional development.

As the novelty of practicing law subsides, it's important to continually reenergize and avoid the potential burnout that looms for some who are transitioning from young-lawyer status. "Continue to view every project as a learning opportunity," recommends Mark Jane, a former YLS chair. "Experience never loses its importance."

This perspective can prevent undervaluing assignments that more-seasoned attorneys may view as mundane while adding importance to projects that will keep a lawyer engaged and committed to the learning involved in everyday practice. "There is always something to learn in this business," said former YLS chair Andrea Irons.

Find a mentor, or better yet, mentors. As our practice areas, experience, and personal and professional responsibilities change during the course of our careers, it's important to have mentors who can provide advice, share experiences, or just listen. Because of the multifaceted nature of practicing law, I recommend having multiple mentors who can assist you in various aspects of the profession. You may have a mentor for life-work balance, a mentor for a specific practice area, and another mentor you turn to for procedural and ethical advice.

It would be difficult to find one mentor able to assist you in all these different areas. Even if you could find that unicorn mentor, you don't want to strain the relationship by being too demanding or needy.

Another avenue to pursue during the transition from being a young lawyer is becoming an expert, author, or presenter on various legal topics instead of an audience member. "If you want to learn something, read about it," said spiritual leader Yogi Bajan. "If you want to understand something, write about it. If you want to master something, teach it."

Many great publications are looking for new articles, continuing legal education providers are seeking new presenters or topics, and young lawyers are looking for advice on all areas of law from substantive questions to law practice management. This is also a way to keep your drive and passion for the law burning, because you can choose the topic, issue, or practice area in which you want to become an expert. You're limited only by your imagination.

Each lawyer is ultimately responsible for his or her own development in and satisfaction with the practice of law. This is true regardless of age or classification, but I think it's especially important for the transitioning young lawyer. This time in a lawyer's career can be empowering or overwhelming; it takes some self-reflection, initiative, and focus to recommit to the practice of law and develop the practice you want. Hon. Maureen McGinnis, a former SBM YLS chair, said it best: "Always [visualize] the bigger picture and what you want to achieve during the course of your career. [Make] your choices with the bigger picture in mind—always be the best, brightest, and most conscientious version of yourself in everything you do."



Staying involved and engaged

The practice of law can be stressful, and having a peer group to connect with on a personal level can be beneficial. Judge McGinnis advised:

I cannot stress enough the importance of getting involved with the organizations that support lawyers and the legal profession. The transition from law student to young lawyer or young lawyer to lawyer will always be easier when you are able to seek out familiar faces in the places that you find yourself. Getting involved gives you an opportunity to meet the people that you may be working with in the next phase of your career.

Staying involved and engaged goes hand-in-hand with pursuing one's professional growth and development. Find what's important to you—whether a specific section of the State Bar, a local bar association, or pro bono representation of a cause close to your heart. Engaging with the legal community or the community at large can provide you with valuable resources, lessons, and relationships that will aid you during any career transition. Not only is participating in these groups or activities important for your practice, but it will likely provide you an opportunity to expand your client base. In this hypercompetitive business, relationships with other lawyers and groups can be an important element of your marketing plan.

Networking is one of the most used words in relation to business development, but think about whether you are truly engaged in networking activities. Be present in your communications; don't look to see whom you can talk to next while you're in the middle of a conversation. This comes back to doing things or attending events that align with what's important to you and what you envision for your practice and career.

Taking time away

Equally important to staying involved and connected is taking time off. Being a lawyer can be a 24/7 gig, no matter the stage of practice. Be sure to develop habits early on that allow you to disengage and recharge. Whether establishing boundaries that allow you to manage personal time without unnecessary interference from work or planning (and taking) regular vacations, you'll benefit by getting away from the daily grind. We probably all know attorneys who are always on the clock; doing so can take a toll on their personal lives and sometimes even on their mental health.

A newfound level of confidence at this stage can be harnessed to forge ahead and define one's career; at the same time, the responsibilities, burnout, and other personal and professional events can create a sense of anxiety and uncertainty.

Conclusion

Transitioning from young lawyer to lawyer is rarely discussed but it can be an exciting time in an attorney's career. A newfound level of confidence at this stage can be harnessed to forge ahead and define one's career; at the same time, the responsibilities, burnout, and other personal and professional events can create a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. I recommend that lawyers at this point in their careers take personal inventory, commit to continued legal education and development, stay engaged, and take time away to center themselves. Take control of your practice and life to determine your own post-young-lawyer story. ■



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