

Climbing the Ladder > column



By Kamau Coar
Ungaretti & Harris

Getting the work you want

A friend who just started at a big firm asked me for some advice on getting better assignments.

In his first few months, most of his work was in the form of discrete projects, but he had not yet been assigned to any matters on a full-time basis.

I gave him my advice and told him to give me a call if I could help out with anything else.

A little later, one of my mentors was giving his perspective on what clients look for from their outside counsel. The similarities between what I was trying to tell my friend and what my mentor was trying to tell me were striking, except that my mentor said it much better than I did.

Getting the work you want is something that all lawyers have to work at, whether it is from within the firm or from an external source.

We all want more meaningful assignments, and we have to demonstrate that we are worthy of the trust that such assignments indicate. That trust is based upon performance, and there are certain things we all can do on every level to build that trust relationship.

It is important to understand that assignments necessarily follow from a belief that the answer you give will be thought out, well-researched, and appropriate under the circumstances.

There is no reason for a partner or client to ask someone to help if he or she does not fully trust your analysis, or if he or she has to double-check your research.

The people for whom you are doing work with have to have confidence in you before they will give you more important work.

The natural question then becomes: What is the best way to build someone's confidence in you and, therefore, your work product?

There are several ways.

One of the easiest and most effective ways is to give your audience insight into your thought process.

Show them how you think and demonstrate your analytical abilities. While giving an answer is a good start, giving that person a reason to believe your answer is even more important.

That person is looking for some basis to believe you.

They won't just take your word for it, they need to know how you arrived at your conclusions.

When you can explain how you reached your answers and how you ruled out other possibilities, that person gains an appreciation for your ability and a trust is born. That person learns that you can be relied upon, and will come back to you when help is needed in the future.

Another way to build the confidence necessary to get better assignments is to provide context.

It is important to show that not only did you understand what your assignment was, but you also understood what the information is going to be used for.

Whatever project you are given is only a part of a larger process.

It may be research for litigation, or it may be a business deal. You will make whatever response you give much more valuable if you are able to articulate not only what you found out, but also how it fits into accomplishing that overall objective.

Lastly, you should keep in mind that partners and clients are always seeking certainty when you give them an answer.

They want to understand how long your work is going to take, how much it is going to cost, and how reliable the final answer is.

Both partners and outside counsel have to report their activities to someone else: partners to their clients and to the court; outside counsel to others within their business.

Your job is to help them look as knowledgeable as possible to whomever they have to report to.

If the project comes in late or over the anticipated budget, it reflects poorly on them and any representations they may have made.

Good projects to work on usually don't just fall into one attorney's hands instead of another's.

They are earned by demonstrating that you did what was promised, when it was promised, and in a way that doesn't just answer the question asked, but does so in a way that resolves the problem or issue.

And if you are only working on smaller assignments, don't fret.

Trust and a reputation for doing quality work is built slowly.

The small assignments are the first step and may determine your reputation (for better or worse) for years to come. ■

kacoar@uhlaw.com