

4 Ways Young Attorneys Can Find The Perfect Mentor

By Tracey Read

Law360 (September 22, 2023, 1:48 PM EDT) -- When Rebecca Pronesti was growing up, her parents used to joke that it took a village to raise her.

"And then I had a village to get through college and law school, and I knew when I started my career, I'd need another village to become successful," she said.

So when Pronesti began her job as an associate at Thompson Hine LLP's Cleveland office two years ago, she got busy finding that village — also known as the mentor-mentee relationship.

Pronesti, who specializes in commercial litigation, ended up with two mentors — one an office neighbor just a few years her senior, Hannah Caldwell, who is in a different practice group.

"She's someone who has been in my shoes. We became friends, and I started to go to her for advice," Pronesti said. "She cares about me as a person and as a professional."

Her other mentor is her practice group leader, Brian J. Lamb, whom she chose while going through the Ohio Supreme Court's Lawyer to Lawyer Mentoring Program. Although the program formally ended in December, Pronesti and Lamb have continued the mentor-mentee relationship informally through phone calls and in-person office visits.

"They both have helped me in different ways," Pronesti said. "With Hannah, it's been how to handle work expectations, how to balance work and life, and how to be more involved in the community and the firm. As a young attorney, you can feel like a little fish in a big pond."

Meanwhile, Lamb's mentoring has helped her confirm she wanted to be a litigator by allowing her to sit in on depositions and giving her other opportunities to be exposed to topics and areas of the law that she otherwise wouldn't have.

"Not everyone is cut out to be a mentor or has time to be a mentor," she said. "He says he's given back what other people have given him."

Pronesti said she considers herself fortunate to find mentors who truly care about her ongoing success.

"I really lucked out with these two on the first go, but it can take a few tries to find the right one," she added. "Don't be discouraged if you don't find the right person right away. There's someone out there

willing to teach."

Here are four tips on how new associates can go about finding the ideal mentor.

Figure Out Your Goals

A good place to start for any junior associate is to spend some time up front thinking about what your professional goals are for the year, and then identify people within your firm who can help you accomplish those goals, advises Milana Hogan, chief of talent at Sullivan & Cromwell LLP.

"In the most successful mentoring relationships, the mentee has a really strong organic interest in the mentor's domain of work," Hogan said. "So a great way to find a mentor is to find somebody who does work in an area that you're interested in, because that tends to set you up for success."

Terra Davis, chief diversity and talent development officer at Knobbe Martens, said it's important for new associates to determine what exactly it is they want to accomplish through the mentoring relationship.

Next, Davis advises figuring out how often you'd like to meet with your mentor, noting someone who is more senior may have less time to spend on the relationship.

"Figuring out exactly what it is that you are looking for in a mentor with respect to the time, the cadence and also your goals and expectations are all critical to the relationship that you're trying to build," Davis said.

Shannon Lam, a partner who chairs Knobbe Martens' mentor committee, agreed, saying: "One of the things that you should consider is, are you looking for a mentor who's physically present in your office that you can go knock on their door? Or would you prefer maybe someone that you connect with in a different way, whether that's background or type of work?"

Be Proactive

Be willing to put yourself out there and just ask people to be your mentor, Davis recommends.

"One of the things that you should be doing in seeking out a mentor is you should be brave and bold," she said. "And when you're looking at folks that you want to be your mentor, think about the types of people who you admire most."

Grover Cleveland, a former law firm partner and founder of Lessons for Sharks LLC, a firm that provides programs and coaching for new attorneys, said associates often tell him they're reluctant to reach out to people who might mentor them because they're concerned about bothering them, or they think the other person is too busy.

"People at law firms are busy, but the partners and the senior associates have all been mentored, and most of them want to pay it forward," he said.

Looking back, Cleveland said he wishes he had been more proactive early on in his career in finding other mentors.

For instance, he recalled being six months into his law firm job doing a regulatory filing for a client who was unhappy at their legal situation.

"And the client was concerned that it was taking too long and costing too much money," Cleveland said. "The partner called me into her office. I walked into this corner office with floor-to-ceiling glass and we got on the phone with the client. She put him on speakerphone, and he just went off! And I was sitting on the call thinking, 'I am going to be fired as soon as she puts down the phone.'"

Instead, the partner hung up the call and calmly told Cleveland they don't take abuse from clients, and then offered to help him come up with a plan to get the job done.

"She was not in my practice area," he said. "But in hindsight, that was a relationship that I should have cultivated because she was looking out for me and the easiest thing would have been to throw me under the bus."

Jennifer Henderson, partner and co-founder of the Hatch Henderson Fivel legal recruiting firm, said most law firms have some sort of formal program where a new associate is assigned a partner mentor, as well as various networking events, affinity groups and employee resource groups that provide good ways to connect with possible mentors.

However, another way to find mentors is to go outside your firm, by reaching out to more senior alumni from your law school or professional organizations to establish a relationship.

"To set you up for a better mentor is to find someone who has your same interests," Henderson said. "Maybe there's someone within your current firm. Maybe it's the trial section of the LA bar association because you want to really go to trial and meet others, so you find out how they were able to accomplish that within their own careers. You kind of need to put yourself out there."

Henderson's partner, Michelle Fivel, said a good place to start is to take advantage of whatever mentorship programs and networking events your firm offers.

"The beauty of those events is that people that are associates at the firm can then rub elbows with the partners that they might not always see on a day-to-day basis in the office," Fivel said.

Make Use of Psychology

Hogan says the psychology of forming friendships in adulthood provides useful insights for junior associates, especially in the mentoring process.

"It's harder for adults to make friends than for children," she said. "One of the interesting takeaways from that research is that people who think that friendships — or strong professional relationships — happen organically and that they can just sort of wait for this to occur, tend to have fewer of them by a notable amount than people who understand that it really requires deliberate effort to make friendships in adulthood or to make strong professional relationships."

The bottom line is that it's not a great strategy for junior associates to wait for someone to take an interest in them. Hogan advises stepping outside your comfort zone by attending a practice group luncheon or starting a conversation with somebody who does work that you're interested in doing.

And then once you've identified a mentor, it's important to find ways to interact with that person frequently because research shows we tend to like people more when they're familiar to us, and when we have repeat exposure to them.

One good way to keep in regular contact would be to work on an assignment with your mentor, since that allows for frequent opportunities to interact with and learn from them.

"For that reason, we have built into our formal mentoring program a requirement that they work on at least one substantive assignment together each year," Hogan said. "It is built-in, repeat exposure, and also allows for the mentor to have some direct knowledge of how the mentee performed in a professional setting, so it's better for real time, specific feedback."

Hogan added that joining a practice group as a junior associate is another opportunity for repeat exposure to a mentor.

Meanwhile, some mentoring relationships never even get off the ground because associates are too scared they'll be rejected.

"Generally speaking, we tend to decide how much to invest in a relationship based on how likely we think we are to get rejected, which is called risk regulation theory," she said. "So if I think I'm gonna get rejected, then I'm much less likely to approach you or anyone, and I think for many junior associates, they are sort of afraid that the partner is too busy or won't have time for them."

But according to another psychological theory called "the liking gap," strangers who interact are more liked by the other person than they assume they will be. The liking gap theory is one part of Sullivan & Cromwell's programming with its junior associates.

Hogan said in her 17 years at the firm, she's never once heard of a partner rejecting a junior associate's request to meet for coffee.

"This is a real apprenticeship profession, and that is how you learn," she said. "You learn from more senior lawyers, you watch them do what they do, and you absorb that. These partners understand that that's a critical part of our lawyer development process. And so for that reason, they're very eager to say yes to people who are seeking new opportunities. So the fear is largely unnecessary."

Meet IRL

Whenever possible, many experts agree that it's easier for junior associates to learn when they can physically be with their mentors.

Davis acknowledged that while technology allows for relationship building across different offices and time zones, Knobbe Martens does its best to make sure that mentors and mentees are physically located in the same place.

Even when that isn't possible, the firm believes it's important for a mentee to meet their mentor at least once before they switch to a virtual relationship.

"It's really important to be able to have some sort of face time with that person," Davis said.

In fact, Knobbe Martens believes so strongly in the value of in-person time that it allows its associates to travel to schedule in-person time with a mentor who is in another office or city, as well as encourages partners to travel to the associate's area as well, she added.

Hogan said Sullivan & Cromwell also believes attorneys work and learn best when they can physically be together.

"It is hard to replicate some of the learning over Zoom or when you can't be in the room to observe somebody delicately handling a challenging situation," Hogan said. "There's so much learning that happens together. I do think in-person time together is probably your best bet if you want to form deeply meaningful mentoring relationships."

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.