

# What the NEW ASSOCIATE Wants to Tell the Senior Partner

by Jack W. Burtch Jr.

Last April, in “Jump-Start Your Career: Tips for New Lawyers,” I suggested a number of points senior partners want new associates to know. The article was a compilation of experience and advice about how to survive in a law firm for those brand-new to our profession. After the article was published, I started hearing from the new lawyers themselves, who asked “When do we get our turn?” It seems there are a few things they want us to know. Since turnabout is fair play, this installment is to let them have their say.

## **There’s a lot of free information out there. Trust me to use it right.**

To the newest generation of lawyers, using computers is natural, if not instinctive. They grew up using computers as the primary resource for everything from doing homework to communicating with friends. It should come as no surprise, then, that they head for the computer rather than the law library when assigned a research project. And when they get to the computer, they tend to pull up Google (the Web’s

most popular search engine) before opening Lexis or Westlaw. They like to research by “triangulation” first, rounding out a general view of the issue at hand from multiple sources, then mentally cross-checking for validity and accuracy.

New lawyers operate on the concept that information is—or should be—free. For them the question is not who owns it, but who can best use it. They hone their skills to make the most of the information they find.

## **I know a lot about technology. Let me use it to do my job better.**

These new lawyers are accustomed to using technology in their personal lives. Just take a look at the personal pages on MySpace or Facebook to see how their generation communicates and keeps up with friends all over the world.

Harnessing this predisposition for technology allows the law firm to reap the value of the high salaries it is paying. Part of

# 8 TIPS

- There's a lot of free information out there. Trust me to use it right.
  - I know a lot about technology. Let me use it to do my job better.
- I've got everything you want in a partner. I'm just younger.
  - I'm willing to stay at your firm. Turnover doesn't have to be a fact of life.
- I want to know how to do my job better today.
- I'm always thinking about building the practice.
- I know how I work best—let me do it.
  - Work doesn't have to feel like work.

today's youth culture is keeping up with what's cutting edge and exciting. Thus, new lawyers may have great ideas about how to make the firm work smarter by applying the technology they already know. It frustrates them if the firm provides computers and equipment more primitive than what they use at home. Putting their knowledge to use makes good economic sense for law firms.

### **I've got everything you want in a partner. I'm just younger.**

New lawyers don't accept chronological age as a legitimate factor in the partnership decision. They are quick to point out that many of the economy's newest billionaires are twenty-something. Businesses run by these new billionaires succeeded by gathering and organizing information better than others. One by-product of the technology revolution has been the democratization of almost everything technology touches.

It's not surprising that newer lawyers find age-oriented promotional hierarchies stifling and unjust. They are more interested in being judged—and in succeeding—by their merits than by their willingness to

stay in one place. They respect hard-won battle scars, knowledge and expertise, but they want to be rewarded for what they can actually do.

A law firm will make a lawyer a partner when that lawyer becomes indispensable. A lawyer who excels in the technical aspects of practice, brings in good business, and contributes to the overall health of the firm will stand out. The newest generation just doesn't see time at the bar as a significant promotion factor.

### **I'm willing to stay at your firm. Turnover doesn't have to be a fact of life.**

Today's employees expect to change jobs many times in their careers. New lawyers are no exception. But new lawyers don't necessarily want it this way. A firm characterized by high turnover and low morale can be devastating to everyone.

**Many in this generation  
find it ironic that law  
firms complain about  
job-hopping yet do little  
to encourage young  
lawyers to stay.**

Continually recruiting, training and assimilating replacement lawyers drains a firm's financial resources and emotional reserves. The new generation does not understand why keeping associates does not appear to be a primary goal for a law firm. Young lawyers believe the ideal firm is one that helps them grow, rewards them for good work, and gives them both an intellectual challenge and emotional satisfaction.

Many in this generation find it ironic that law firms complain about job-hopping yet do little to encourage young lawyers to stay. The unspoken assumption is, if you really wanted to keep me, you would listen to me. Loyalty begets loyalty. When lawyers are seen as fungible billing units, they tend to behave that way.

One side note: Law firms benefit from this phenomenon of job-hopping. They are enriched by the knowledge and experience new lawyers may have gained before law school or before making a lateral move to the firm.

**I want to know how to do my job better today.**

Young lawyers are expected to give instant, competent advice, whether they're responding on their cell phones to super-

vising lawyers or clients or checking e-mail on their Blackberrys every few minutes. Likewise, they expect the same timeliness in evaluation of their own work. To them, the law firm's annual review process is antediluvian. They want feedback at the speed of work. They also want to know what they are doing well, not just what needs improvement. Great lawyers achieve great distinction by sharpening their best skills. Yet sometimes new lawyers need to be told what their best skills are.

The current generation doesn't want to wait six months to find out what they've been doing wrong—they want to do things right today. Here, impatience is a virtue.

**I'm always thinking about building the practice.**

Senior lawyers often complain that every weekend young associates board planes or pack up cars to attend friends' weddings far away. Or, late every Friday afternoon, they get together with old college pals at happy hour. The new group resents this grumbling. They think we talk out of both sides of our mouths.

On one hand, they hear us say they are not motivated to build a law practice. On the other, they believe their relentless networking is precisely what law firms call "marketing." It's just the way they market to their peers. It's no secret that young people are marrying later these days. Post-college employment, graduate education and geographical experiments have lengthened the time between college and marriage. During these years, the current generation is making many friends in many cities. Hence, the every-weekend-there's-another-wedding epidemic.

But that wedding three states away is not just an excuse to play. It's a chance for young lawyers to let their peer group know they're working at a great law firm. At these events, they meet their friends and friends of friends. These are all rising business, professional and community leaders. Building these relationships is

marketing. Our young lawyers ask why they are being chided for doing what we say we want.

As for the work back at the office, don't worry. The Blackberry and cell phone are close at hand.

**I know how I work best—let me do it.**

Gone are the days when one could truly leave work at the office. Clients demand that we be on call nearly 'round the clock. We, in turn, demand this of ourselves. Consequently, we expect our employees to devote a full commitment of mind and time to the cases at hand.

Young lawyers understand this and are, on the whole, willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done correctly and on time. In a way, they actually embrace this idea because it mirrors their personal lives. Every friend is but a phone call or text message away—and a less-than-prompt response quickly elicits frustration. In fact, one of this generation's salient strengths is its ability to multitask. A lawyer whose mind can effectively handle more than one thing at once is well-served in the courtroom. This skill translates naturally from a young lawyer's habit of talking on the phone and writing an e-mail at the same time. It's not meant as disrespect; young lawyers see it as efficiency.

They are more committed to doing the job than being present in the office. If they are expected to be on call most of their waking hours, they see it as only fair that they be allowed to work in whatever manner or place they feel is most effective.

**Work doesn't have to feel like work.**

Work is an important part of young lawyers' lives, and they take it seriously. Not much can rival the esteem-building gratification of success in your chosen career. But work is only one part of life. Young lawyers today are told that work-life balance is important to both the new associate and the firm. New lawyers see themselves as respon-

sible for allocating office and home hours to achieve that balance.

Yet their real aim is not so much to draw a line between two mutually exclusive lives, but to have them exist in harmony, each enriching and informing the other. For young lawyers today, a healthy work life is fulfilling, not oppressive.

Some lawyers will disagree absolutely with these points. But our profession has always been open to different points of view. The message young lawyers want us to hear is simple: they grew up in a fast-paced world with little unscheduled time. They have a different set of skills, talents and motivations. They made the sacrifice,

usually evidenced by heavy loads of debt, to finish law school and pass the bar. They want to make their mark on our profession. By playing to their strengths, rather

than criticizing their differences, we will all come out ahead. ♪



**Jack W. Burtch Jr.** was admitted to the Virginia Bar in 1973. He received his undergraduate degree in 1969 from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and his law degree in 1972 from Vanderbilt University, where he served as an editor of the *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*. After serving as an associate in the labor law section of Hunton & Williams from 1973 to 1980, Burtch became a principal of the firm that became McSweeney, Burtch & Crump. In January 2001, he joined the firm that became Macaulay & Burtch PC, where he represents businesses, executives and professionals in employment law and labor relations. Burtch is an adjunct professor of law at the University of Richmond School of Law, where he teaches negotiations, interviewing and counseling.