

## Member Spotlight

# Stepping Forward Early: Why Young Associates Should Seek Challenge and Autonomy

*By Ryan Mill*

For many young associates, the first years of practice are defined by a careful balance: learning the fundamentals while trying not to overstep. It is natural — if not inevitable — to feel hesitant about taking on tasks that seem just beyond one’s current level of comfort. Yet, it is precisely in these moments of discomfort that meaningful professional development occurs.

Early in one’s career, opportunities to stretch are often disguised as daunting assignments: leading a client call, drafting a dispositive motion, taking the lead on a deposition, or volunteering to argue a motion. The instinct may be to defer, to wait until one feels “ready.” However, readiness in the legal profession is less a prerequisite and more a byproduct of experience. Associates who proactively seek out challenging work develop critical skills faster, build confidence sooner, and establish themselves as trusted advocates of their firm’s clients — ultimately leading to the development of their own client base.

One of the most immediate benefits of pursuing greater responsibility is skill acceleration. Complex assignments demand not only legal knowledge but also judgment, organization, and adaptability. While observing senior attorneys provides valuable insight, true growth occurs when associates are forced to synthesize that knowledge and execute independently. Each challenging project becomes a condensed learning experience that cannot be replicated through passive participation.

Equally important is the development of professional confidence. Confidence in legal practice is not derived from titles or tenure; it comes from repeated exposure to responsibility and the realization that one can meet it effectively. Taking ownership of substantive tasks, even when imperfectly executed at first, reinforces an associate’s ability to navigate uncertainty. Over time, this confidence translates into more effective advocacy and stronger client relationships.

Seeking autonomy also signals initiative — a quality that senior attorneys and clients alike recognize and reward. Associates who volunteer for responsibility demonstrate investment

in their work and commitment to their own development. This often leads to increased trust, more meaningful assignments, and a greater role in case strategy. Rather than remaining on the periphery, these associates become integral members of the team earlier in their careers.

Of course, pursuing challenge does not mean operating without guidance. Effective associates understand when to ask questions, seek feedback, and collaborate with more experienced colleagues. The goal is not to eliminate supervision, but to gradually shift from reliance to independence. This progression requires both initiative from the associate and support from mentors who are willing to delegate and provide constructive feedback.

Importantly, embracing early challenges also reframes how failure is perceived. Mistakes are inevitable, particularly when stepping into unfamiliar territory. However, when approached with a growth mindset, these experiences become some of the most valuable learning opportunities. Associates who push beyond their comfort zones learn not only how to succeed, but also how to recover, adapt, and improve.

In a profession that demands both intellectual rigor and practical judgment, there is no substitute for hands-on experience. Young associates who actively seek out challenging assignments and advocate for increased autonomy position themselves to grow more quickly and meaningfully. While the initial discomfort may be unavoidable, it is also temporary, and the long-term benefits are substantial. The early years of practice offer a unique window for accelerated development. Associates who lean into that opportunity, rather than away from it, often find themselves not just keeping pace, but setting it. Next time you find yourself in an uncomfortable position, lean into it, because it will bring you closer to where you want to be professionally.



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