

How to Build a Successful and Meaningful Health Law Practice

Hal Katz

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Tailor your involvement in professional organizations and community service to support your career as a health lawyer.

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This is an edited and abridged version of an article that originally ran in the January 2021 issue of ABA Health eSource. ABA Health eSource is published by the ABA Health Law Section, which is the voice of the national health law bar within the ABA. [Read the full version](#), which contains more career questions from health law associates and answers from Hal Katz, partner at Husch Blackwell, in Austin, Texas. [Learn more about membership in the ABA Health Law Section.](#)

Recent conversations with associates at Husch Blackwell reminded me of my days as an associate. I recall wondering whether I was doing a good job, if more billable hours meant significantly more money, and what it would take [to become a partner](#). The firm had a mentor program and associate reviews, but [I still was unsure](#) of the answers. Directly approaching a partner was intimidating. The partners who assigned me work were brilliant, important, and busy, and getting any of their time to answer questions on work assignments was tough. I also worried about coming across like [I wasn't ambitious, intelligent](#), or appreciative. Over the years, I've tried to mentor associates inside and outside the firm and create more comfortable opportunities for these kinds of discussions.

I asked a handful of diverse associates to provide me with their career questions (anonymously), and I'm sharing the questions along with my answers.



1

What progress do partners want to see from an associate over time (skills, abilities, etc.)?

Over the first couple of years, partners want to see you develop strong research and [writing skills](#), and they want to know that [you are reliable and conscientious](#). Next, partners want to see you establishing expertise in one or more substantive areas of the law, taking the initiative to follow-up on work assignments, and developing good relationships with colleagues and clients. They want to see you pursuing initiatives within the firm and leadership opportunities outside the firm that provide brand [building and business development](#) opportunities.

2

What should I be doing as an associate to develop business in the future?

First, be patient. Business development is the product of many steps that happen over an extended period. It is a combination of legal skills, expertise, experience, communication skills, relationships, and marketing, but it is also about [being visible](#). Some of [the most straightforward business development is right inside your law firm](#), especially in the early years of your practice. During this time, you are developing your reputation with colleagues and initiating your marketing and brand-building.

Next is building a reputation and brand outside your firm through interactions with clients, being visible on LinkedIn and Twitter, article and blog writing, presenting at conferences, and becoming active within trade and professional organizations. Before you know it, you will be generating business from lawyers within the firm, existing clients, and new clients.

3

When it comes to health law expertise—in which essential areas do you think an associate should become competent?

All health law associates should complete a health law fundamentals program. From there, I have found that having a general and ongoing understanding of fraud and abuse, privacy, and licensure issues all provide the necessary foundation for [developing as a health lawyer](#). I would also recommend becoming familiar with standard business and legal matters with contract drafting.

4

How should I be marketing myself as a healthcare lawyer, and when should I start doing so?

Marketing should start soon after becoming a lawyer. First, call yourself a health lawyer, and [develop two sentences that describe your practice](#) for when you meet people. Second, tailor your firm bio, LinkedIn page, and Twitter account (yes, I said Twitter account) to focus on the healthcare industry. Third, create content (which does not need to be long or [legalese](#)) that you can use on your website, blog, or social media accounts and with organizations with which you're involved. Fourth, develop a social media strategy that includes following colleagues, clients, credible organizations, and regularly “liking,” “sharing,” and posting content.

5

What are the “hot” areas or niches in healthcare law right now (obviously COVID), and do you see a young associate having longevity in this field?

Regulatory and business issues in the telehealth, digital health, and behavioral health sectors will likely be growing for the next several years. I also believe regulatory and business issues around the pandemic will continue to be an important area and opportunity for health lawyers. While I don't necessarily suggest associates devote 100 percent of their time to this area, there is a lot of overlap with other operational and business issues, making it well worth cultivating and maintaining the expertise.

6

Is it as important to be involved in bar associations such as ABA and AHLA as people say?

Yes. Being involved in the [ABA Health Law Section](#) has been one of my most rewarding experiences as a health lawyer and the best investment of non-billable time. My first appointment was vice-chair of the [Managed Care and Insurance Interest Group](#) when I was a fourth-year associate. It allowed me to [stay informed](#) of industry trends across the country; develop relationships with national thought leaders in private practice, government, and in-house; and organically build my brand. It also provided me with career-long friendships that I treasure as much as family.

7

How do you manage a full workload, personal commitments, well-being, and business development?

It definitely isn't easy, and I don't always do the best job of [balancing](#). I have been very fortunate to have strong time management and organizational skills, which have helped a great deal. I have also been very intentional with how I spend my time. My involvement in professional organizations, community service, and law firm initiatives supports my efforts to be a successful health lawyer. The professional organizations with which I am involved are within [the healthcare industry](#). My community service roles are predominantly with healthcare organizations, and my involvement in the firm further supports my practice. This strategy ensures that almost everything I am doing is contributing to becoming a better health lawyer.

8

When thinking about the long-term development of an associate's health law practice, is it better to cultivate a generalist practice or focus primarily on specific areas of health law?

I think almost all health lawyers have struggled with this question. When I was an associate, I was overwhelmed with all there was to know, and desperately wanted the confidence from what I thought would come from focusing on a particular aspect of health law. However, over the years, I have realized that broader experience allows a lawyer to see other peripheral business and legal

issues that likely would have been missed. It also helps develop judgment when assessing issues on the risk continuum and makes it much easier to cross-sell other business naturally. At some point, it may make sense to concentrate on a few [specific areas of health law](#), but I wouldn't feel the pressure to do so within your first five years as a lawyer.

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