

Stage 7: Tips on How to Survive Your Articles

You have secured your articling job, finished law school, and are ready to start your legal career ... now what do you do?

Although you've successfully navigated through three years of law school, many of your legal lessons just begin when you commence your articling year. Like anything new and somewhat uncertain, the prospect of starting work in a law firm can be stressful. In order to try to lessen that burden, here are our 20 tips on how to survive your articling year, from the mouths of our seasoned articling students.

1. **Know your limits.** As an articling student, one of the most challenging situations you will face is turning down work. Ultimately, you're the only one who knows your workload. Sometimes it is simply not possible for you to take any additional work. Learn when and how to say "no".
2. **Be organized.** At any given moment you may have a number of tasks and projects on the go. When it gets busy, it's virtually impossible to remember everything. Write things down, put reminders in your calendar, and develop a system with your assistant to remain "on track".
3. **Write down instructions.** When you receive instructions from a lawyer, make detailed notes. If the instructions are long or complex, dictate the notes immediately after the meeting.
4. **Ask if you need clarification.** If a lawyer gives you unclear instructions or you have lingering questions about what is required of you, ask for clarification. It's much better to ask what you think is a "dumb question" than to answer the wrong question or to spend way too much time on an assignment because you weren't quite sure what the lawyer wanted.
5. **Ask about time estimates and deadlines.** When taking instructions from a lawyer to perform an assignment, ask how long it should take you to complete the assignment and when it is required. If it later appears you will require more time than the estimate given or cannot meet the deadline, let the lawyer know early. Lawyers will generally understand if a task requires more time and, if possible, will be flexible about deadlines, but they hate last-minute surprises.
6. **Document everything.** Every time you make or receive a phone call, keep detailed written notes. If you receive an important voicemail, record it on your Dictaphone and have it transcribed. You or others may need to refer to these notes in the course of acting on a file.
7. **Attend social functions.** It provides a great opportunity to meet the people who you work with. You'll be surprised by how many friends you'll make during your articling year.
8. **Make friends with everyone in the office.** They know the ropes and can help you out when you need it.
9. **Use assistants and office support.** Take the time to think about what you can hand off to your assistant or to other support services. Then delegate. Don't spend your time doing something that could properly be handled by someone else.

10. **Get a mentor, or better yet, get many mentors.** Every firm has senior partners, junior partners, and associates who have reputations for taking an interest in the development of students. Seek these people out. They can make the difference between a good articling experience and a great articling experience.
11. **Be proactive.** If there's an area of law you in which you want to work or an aspect of practice you would like to experience, ASK. Taking the initiative will help you get the most out of your articling experience. You may not realize it at the time, but you have a lot of control over the direction your articling year takes. It would be really unfortunate if, at the end of the process, you find yourself saying "I wish I had experienced ...".
12. **Don't be overly focused on "hire back".** It's easy to be too focused on hire back decisions, particularly at the start of your articles. Your energy is better focused on obtaining valuable experience and building relationships.
13. **Seek out skills training.** Many law firms offer in-house seminars for students and junior associates. Take the time to attend these sessions and learn something new. If your firm doesn't offer these, go to outside meetings or courses that sound interesting. Your articling year should be a time of learning, not just billing.
14. **Keep an open mind.** Go into your articling year with an open mind as to where you will end up. Maybe you know exactly the area in which you want to practise and maybe you don't. There are always surprises and, at the very least, experience in other areas helps you to make an informed choice.
15. **Learn dictation.** It's strange at first, but the more you practice, the easier it gets. It can be a huge timesaver.
16. **Record all of the time you spend on an assignment.** Don't record less time than you actually worked on an assignment simply because you think it took you too long. As a novice, you don't know how long it would take even an experienced lawyer to do the same task, so you cannot assess what is "too long". Recording your time is part of the learning process. If "write-downs" should occur, the supervising lawyer will handle it.
17. **Maintain a balance.** Articling can be incredibly busy and stressful; it can be easy to neglect your non-work activities and relationships. Do your best to get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, and maintain your relationships with your significant other, friends, and family. It will help you in the long run.
18. **Don't take things personally.** If a lawyer says a memo isn't particularly helpful, or a draft pleading comes back full of red marks and writing, don't get down on yourself. You're there to learn and are not expected to know everything.
19. **I repeat, don't take things personally.** There are many strong personalities in the profession. Enough said.
20. **Take a deep breath and be brave.** You will have to do things for the first time. There is a lot of responsibility. It can be scary. But we have all done it. So can you.