

BRIEFING NOTE

To: Justyn Jagger, Newly Qualified Lawyer
From: Justyn Jagger, Your Future Self
Subject: A Successful Career in Law (aka Your Survival Kit)
Date: 27 January 2022

Hi Justyn

It's your future self here. Sorry it's taken 30 years to drop you a note. But with all this "*lawyers leaving the profession*" and "*the profession is toxic*" stuff going round in the press, I thought it was high time to write and give you a few pointers. But like vinyl albums (remember them?) by Simple Minds and Springsteen, there's some good stuff and not so good stuff. So quoting Simon and Garfunkel's *The Boxer*, "*hear what you want to hear and disregard the rest*".

Now you've graduated university and got through law school. Well done! Emoji smiley face and thumbs up. You are every future mother in law's dream! So that's one thing you don't have to worry about. Well, that said, we'll deal with the institution of marriage in another missive. Let's say that's the good news. Here's the bad news. The real world's out there. And it is not petty. But I am going to give you some tips to navigate what you're about to face.

First up, what do you want to do? You have a bunch of choices: judicial service, civil service, private practice (commercial, family, crime, conveyancing) regulatory, compliance, in house, multi-disciplinary professional service firm, start up, academia, sales and marketing. You've got a lot more choice than I ever had and here's the thing. Many regulatory/compliance/in house teams are twice the size of private practice teams. And because they are bumping up with the client and the regulator every day, they know a lot more than you. Beware of that!

So, you want to go into private practice? Really? It's not like *L.A. Law*, *Ally McBeal*, or *Suits*. Go watch *The Verdict* (Paul Newman) if you want to know how miserable/elating it can be. *The Devil's Advocate* (Al Pacino/Keanu Reeves) gives you an idea of law firm structure. *Better Call Saul* gives an insight into law firm politics and the dog fight for clients. And it is a dog fight.

You have signed up for Big Law? Now let's get three things straight from the outset. First, it's not about you. It's about maximizing profit per equity partner. That's it. And that's the number against which all firms are judged because that's the number that the equity partner that you are working in that corner office for takes home to pay for the mortgage, school fees, cars, holiday, and every other cost that comes with being middle class. Second, two in a hundred achieve equity. The odds are not great. Third, the road to equity is associate, senior associate, junior partner and then equity partner. It used to take ten years. Now it's twenty. Or more.

You don't want to wait twenty years to get into the equity? I get that. Personal circumstances change and even if they don't, firms go bust along the way, see Coudert Brothers, Howrey, Dewey LeBoeuf, and a bunch of others, so you have to start all over again. What to do?

So, now I am going to give you some tips to hold your work and personal life together.

First, you have to have an *“insatiable appetite for very hard work”*. I am quoting Mr. Edward Walker-Arnott Q.C., the Senior Partner of Herbert Smith when I joined the firm in 1992. And 30 years later, I agree. But that is not as tough as you may think. Why? Because you get addicted to very hard work. Well, you get addicted to finding the right answer, which requires very hard work. It’s like learning to play golf. It completely sucks when you start out because it is so damned tough. Then the ball gets airborne. Then goes in the hole. Then you’re hooked.

Second, *“There are only three things that matter in private practice: clients, clients, clients”*. I am quoting Lord David Gold, Head of Litigation at Herbert Smith in 1996 at a firm retreat at Le Touquet in France. That was the most (and only) inspiring management speech I have ever heard because that was the speech. Ten seconds. Then Mr. Gold handed the microphone to a colleague. And that is litigation. Have knowledge. Make your point succinctly. Shut up.

Third, how do you get the *“clients, clients, clients”*? Now it’s my turn to offer some advice. And the advice is simple: identify the demand, provide the supply and first through the wall gets battered and bruised. When I first came to Singapore in 1999, I saw a country developing an insurance industry hub. And over 15 of those 20 years, I served the industry faithfully. Then other law firms from London came to town and, as the insurance industry is reinsured out of London, the work migrated to those London law firms. What to do when (Re)Insurers desert you? Work for the Insureds. *“Heaven hath no rage like love to hatred turned. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned”*. William Congreve’s advice is as relevant today as it was in 1697. My advice to you, find a developing industry, find what legal advice they need and research and provide it. And if they turn against you then fight them. It’s why lawyers join the DoJ, then private practice. Gamekeeper turned Poacher? Well, that’s really a matter of perspective.

Fourth, you have a client base. Now we are getting somewhere! And the now is the fork in the road, or at least the *Crossroads* (see Bon Jovi’s apocryphal Greatest Hits Collection).

Turning left is the advice *“People only do business with people they like”*. This applies to your clients, your service providers, your associates and the support staff in your firm. Make friends with them and hang on to them because you will need them and they will need you. And if you truly like one another then there is not a problem you cannot solve through dialogue. As a lawyer you are paid to resolve your clients’ problems. But they are not your problems and your objectivity is a powerful weapon in the battle for resolution. Your service providers are your allies and your associates are your brothers in arms. They want you to win and you want them to progress. And the support staff are your lifeline. Respect them and they will prioritise your bills, get your expenses approved and give you all the gossip in the firm, including yours.

Turning right is the drunken slur *“You are the most hated man in Singapore”*. Yes, having been invited to a loss adjusters’ cocktail party (when we could have parties of more than five persons), one inebriated adjuster who was supposed to be hosting the party said exactly that. So what? Big Deal. You have been and will be called worse to your face, in social media, behind your back, wherever. The answer? You cannot make an omelette without breaking some eggs. Aka, it comes with the territory of being good at what you do and fighting for your clients. Go watch Jerry Seinfeld’s *Comedians In Cars Getting Coffee*, particularly the episode with Michael Richards (Kramer in Seinfeld). If you fight for comedy, you’ll get brick bats. Live with it.

Fifth, *"You got to fight for your right to party"*. Yes, this was the title of a 1986 Beastie Boys' hit that left an indelible mark on the social development of the equity partner for whom you are now working, but it is also the rallying cry for your legal career. If you choose to stay with the BigLaw firm with whom you have signed up then you are going to have to fight through associate and salaried partner ranks to get equity. You know what you have to bill, collect it and if you do not get equity then move. If you are good then your clients will move with you.

And if you really have the talent, courage and skill, then set up your own firm. By identifying your area of expertise, by pricing your services, by keeping your clients close and by winning the work and delivering on time, on budget and on quality, that's when you can start to make a difference to the lives of those for whom and with whom you work. Courage, my friend.

You have grown up in a rules-based system. When you run your own firm, those rules apply, but as an owner you get to determine how you apply those rules. Yes, it's frightening. But it's more frightening to your critics, competition, and opponents because you are treading where they fear to tread. You are showing them that your way works and in doing that you are threatening their way of working and striking fear into their hearts. And if it does not work out? So what? You tried when others dared not to try. You know. Because you were there.

Sixth, *"Feels like lightning running through my veins, every time I look at you. Every time you walk away."* (David Gray, Babylon). Whatever you want from a career with law or with any other profession, that relationship will never replace the relationship which you must have with family, friends, colleagues, clients, even opponents. Because that's what living is. The people in your life. Not sorting out the problems of others, no matter how important those problems are. Your career in the law is 30 years, if you're lucky. If you're really lucky, you'll come out of those 30 years with relationships that will last another 30 years. So, make sure that whilst you are busy sorting out all those other problems, you put all those people first.

Seventh, and I guess it has to be seventh because of lucky number seven, or maybe we split this advice into seventh and eighth if you aspire to work in Asia, enjoy life. This is a big statement and because you are a lawyer, you require further and better particulars. So here they are. Put your family and friends first. In the short term, it will not be clear why. In the longer term, it will get clearer. Let's just say, priorities change. Next, on a business trip, add on a day to see the place you are visiting. Nobody will miss you, but you might miss a city, a province, or a country to which you will never return. Finally, do not neglect your passions. To others they seem trivial, because they are. But then they will never understand the bliss of the deserted driving range at closing time, or the joy of the burn and sweat of a 10 km run. Find the time to preserve those pleasures. They will fade but they will never grow old.

Eighth. Yes, I said eight. Ok, if you do all of the above and you set up a law firm and you decide to write an article which only the most dedicated will read to the end, arm yourself with a free afternoon, a bit of experience, a bottle of Chianti and the back catalogue of U2 songs.

In Vino Veritas, young man.

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