

Don't Forget Your Pen

By SARA J. O'BRIEN

A friend's father passed away a few years ago. Surprising to many, his secretary gave one of the eulogies. While she knew him as a boss, she also watched him grow as a husband, a father, and a friend. She spoke about how no matter how busy he became or stressed that he was, he always took the time to know his employees, to treat them kindly, and to remember their birthdays, which were always celebrated with a handwritten note and a handpicked gift. They spent 40+ hours a week together, year after year, but it was the little things, she stressed, that made the difference.

The traditional American workweek is comprised of five eight-hour days, totaling 40 hours per week. There is not much typical, or even predictable, about a lawyer's workweek. Our profession is known for its long hours, and it is no secret that our work weeks exceed 40 hours. This model has us spending as much time (or more) with our colleagues than with our families. Together we celebrate the good days and together we push through the bad. We win cases and negotiate settlements, but we also face difficult clients and confront challenging opposing counsel. Amongst all of that, we experience life itself—marriages, births, funeral services, illnesses, promotions, anniversaries, and birthdays. These moments, which are personal in nature, inevitably become part of the fabric of your work life—impacting your mood, motivating your actions, fighting for time on your calendar—and are shared and experienced with your colleagues over lunch, or coffee, or happy-hour drinks.

Sara J. O'Brien is chair of the Connecticut Bar Association Young Lawyers Section for the 2024-2024 bar year. She is an attorney at Stanfield Bechtel Law LLC in Middletown, where she handles civil matters, including personal injury, professional malpractice, employment, and small business law.



Now in my seventh year of practice, I find that the better you know your team, the better you communicate, the more you understand, and the better you collaborate serves to improve the overall success of your clients and your team. Along the same vein, I find myself reflecting more and more upon how I choose to communicate, the purpose of that communication, and the potential effect of that communication. Should I blast off a quick email? Will my words carry an unintended tone? Could I explain it better in a call? Am I responding to provide value or am I responding to win a battle of egos? Does the gravity of the subject matter warrant an in-person exchange? I've learned to interrupt my impulse to reply immediately and consider the purpose of my words.

In my last article, I stressed the importance of embracing digital networking, and I stand by that position, but you cannot maximize your professional growth solely by sitting behind a computer screen. We must go one step further. We must regularly disconnect from technology and slow the process if we truly want to reconnect through meaningful personal exchanges to enhance our professional relationship through understanding and empathy.

Technological advancements have thrust us so far into the future that we sometimes forget the simple, dare I say archaic, means of connection and communication that ground us as human beings. The smartphones that we hold so near and dear are almost a double-edged sword, perpetually connecting us to work. It further feeds into the guilt-like feeling and even anxiety that young lawyers often carry—that they can never truly disconnect, that they should be readily available to the partners or managers to whom they report. The ability to instantaneously communicate affords us a luxury of providing an immediate response, but it also impedes our heed to caution, to proofread, and even to consider the content of our message. Yes, emails and instant messaging have their place in the profession, but this is not a replacement for other more thoughtful or personal, and sometimes more appropriate, modes of communication.

A handwritten note takes minutes to write. (Probably a .6 on your time log, but who's tracking?) However, the impact and effect that it can have in both your personal and professional life is immeasurable. My father always told me to follow up any interview with a handwritten note, thanking the interviewer for taking the time to meet

with me and consider me for the position. “It will make a difference,” he would say. He was right, it did make a difference, but I think it can make an even bigger difference if you choose the handwritten note in more situations. Do not only connect with an event speaker via LinkedIn but send a handwritten note thanking them for their contribution to the program and let them know what you learned from them. Do not only “like” the Bar Association’s LinkedIn post highlighting an award recipient, send a handwritten congratulations. Do not only wish your paralegal or secretary happy birthday on Facebook, take the time to give them a card and wish them well.

In a profession where we often find ourselves overworked and over stressed, it is the little things that will make the difference. Among the fast-paced technology and ever pinging notifications, we must remember to pause, to engage in thoughtful communication, and to always remember your team members’ birthdays. ■



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