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## **Fake it 'til You Make It: Accelerating Your Career Growth**

### **I. Part 1: Break from the Crowd**

#### **How does a young attorney or insurance professional stand out among their peers?**

One common challenge facing young insurance and legal professionals today is how to distinguish themselves in the workplace and the legal community amongst a constantly growing crowd. As more and more Baby Boomers are retiring, many insurance companies and law firms are hiring more rapidly than in the recent years' past, making it more important than ever for those new to these fields to focus on differentiating themselves from the pack. In light of the fierce competition, what can young professionals do to make a name for themselves and stand out from the crowd?

#### **A. Take Ownership and Initiative**

Employees who take ownership of an assignment from the get-go will always stand out. This means understanding how the project at hand fits into the overall goal. When you ask questions about the longer-term strategies your managers have in mind, you will likely end up with a better work product. Even if the assigning person does not have time to explain or give you more information than what you need to know to complete the one task, they will generally appreciate the fact that you asked and that you took ownership of the project. Often times, ownership of a project does not end with one assignment. For example, the research you conduct turns into the basis of a motion that you later are the one to argue. In many instances, you can get on top of these things before the assigning person has to ask you to do so. Taking the initiative from the beginning sets the best young professionals apart from the rest.

#### **B. Understand Your Own Limitations**

While just about everyone in the insurance and legal industry are over-achievers to some extent, the pressure is especially intensified for young professionals to say yes to every single assignment, task, request, or favor that is asked of them. A generous, can-do attitude is generally appreciated, and everyone wants to be seen as the go-to, reliable claims professional

that rises about the rest. But nothing is more important than knowing when you physically cannot complete something that has been asked of you within the required time-frame and speaking up honestly about this. The failure to do so sets you up to disappoint your supervisors and overwhelm yourself at best and opens the door for blown deadlines and serious consequences (not to mention a firing offense and/or malpractice). Failing to communicate may seriously harm your client's interest. While the situation in which you suddenly have too much on your plate cannot always be avoided, there are ways to try to prevent and manage it.

Open communication is key. For every single task that is asked of you, ask the assigning person for a completion deadline. This may seem futile in many occasions, as very often the response is "as soon as possible" or "as soon as you can get it done." But because calendars are always changing, it is essential to speak up about what else is on your plate. If you support multiple people, the supervisor who assigned this project may have no idea how much you are handling for someone else.

If a situation arises in which you cannot make a required deadline, try to find a solution first before informing your supervisor. Proposing a possible solution to a problem takes work off your supervisor's plate and demonstrates initiative and ownership, even if a project is beyond your current capacity.

### **C. Treat Everyone with Professionalism**

It seems only logical that younger associates should show deference to those with more authority, but this concept is not obvious to everyone. Deference should be shown in both good times and bad, and respect and gratitude should be extended to both those who out-rank you and those who work under your direction. Do not assume you can disregard something an assigning person asks of you just because you are close to them in terms of "class rank." Do not assume you can complain or vent to someone just because they *are* of the same "rank." And do not forget deference and professionalism are more important than ever when things go wrong. When mistakes are made, deadlines are missed, or clients are angry, it is your responsibility to step up to the plate.

### **D. Keep Perspective**

Remember to practice gratitude. Each day treat your job as a privilege (that can be taken away at any time). Inevitably, there will be times the grind gets the best of you and you may question why you ever went into this profession in the first place. But remember the opportunity to work in this field is something you are lucky to have. When you exhibit this attitude in every toward every task you are given and toward every interaction you have with a coworker, client, or opposing counsel, you will stand out from the others and be the person with whom everyone wants to work.

## **E. Sought-after qualities**

While specific job duties may vary across professions and companies, there are numerous qualities employers universally seek in a job applicant or employee when considering them for hire or advancement within the company. First, employers want to know they can count on more junior employees to have a keen eye for detail, so their supervisor does not need to worry about correcting their work. In this vein, accountability for oneself is also a highly valuable quality. Integrity and responsiveness are especially crucial to fields such as insurance and litigation. When receiving multiple simultaneous demands and sometimes conflicting interests, employers need to know they can rely on their team members to make the right decision quickly.

## **II. Build Confidence**

### **How does a young professional maintain confidence as they take on new projects?**

When it comes to tackling unfamiliar projects, there are a few tips new professionals may find useful.

First, it is important to visualize the desired result. If you do not have an understanding of how the project fits into the big picture, it might be helpful to set a time to discuss it with the person who assigned the project if possible.

Second, most big projects can be broken into smaller, less intimidating pieces. Mapping out what needs to be done and when can significantly boost confidence. Making a plan and laying it all out can significantly add to your understanding of what it will take to accomplish the goal.

As important as it is to believe in your own ability to accomplish the goal, it is also important to identify the components of the project for which you will need guidance. Once you have pinpointed the areas of concern, look for resources that may help you unravel those mysteries. If those resources involve anyone else's time, be it a colleague, supervisor, or a trusted source outside your organization, make sure you reach out to them with plenty of time before your deadline. If you give them more flexibility in terms of timing and logistics, they will be less likely to think of you as a burden and will more likely give better advice.

### **Recite a mantra**

Maintaining confidence as a young professional can be difficult, especially in the confrontational fields of claims and litigation. Some find it helpful to repeat a mantra. For example, "Just because you are older than me does not mean you are wiser." This advice can be helpful for attorneys who are up against more seasoned veterans who have been practicing longer than they have. Do not focus on the bar number or the number of years of experience of other attorneys or professionals in the field.

### **III. Part 3: Eliminate bias in a multi-generational workplace**

#### **A. Defining implicit bias**

Have you ever wondered why the demographics of CEOs and those in leadership positions remain largely homogenous regardless of a diverse workforce? Or why certain physical attributes, such as being tall, are associated with leaders? Unconscious associations, or implicit bias, may be part of the reason.

While many companies understand and take active measures to prevent explicit bias in the workplace, the danger of implicit bias often remains unaddressed. Bias can be defined as prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair. Implicit bias remains problematic, in part, because it is often difficult to observe. Implicit bias stems from the attitudes and beliefs we hold about a person or group on *subconscious level*. Unlike explicit bias, implicit bias occurs subconsciously. Thus, the decisions and actions resulting in bias may not even be known to the person who holds the bias.

#### **B. Why implicit bias matters**

Before addressing suggestions to overcome bias, an examination of the reasons you should care about bias, beyond complying with antidiscrimination laws, is in order. Research indicates gender disparity exists across many fields. For example, as of 2016, fewer than 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs were women, women accounted for only 17% of the highest positions in the top 200 law firms, and only 19% of congressional representatives and 12% of state governors were women.<sup>[i]</sup> Implicit bias hampers diversity, which often leads to increased productivity and profits. Studies show the benefits of diversity include innovation, business growth, increased problem solving, higher earnings and returns on equity, and increased creativity.

#### **C. Overcome implicit bias at the individual level**

Since diversity benefits companies, employees, and clients, how can we best address implicit bias? On an individual level, the elimination of implicit bias begins with simply identifying one's biases. One resource for identifying biases is Project Implicit, which offers online tests to evaluate biases based on 14 different criteria ranging from weight to race to sexuality. The AAUW (American Association of University Women) offers the following strategies for individuals to overcome implicit bias: focus on concrete positive and negative factors rather than "gut" feelings, notice when your responses and decisions may have been caused by bias and stereotypes, think about people who positively defy expected stereotypes as examples, and make an effort to think about members of stereotyped groups as individuals.

#### **D. Overcoming implicit bias at the company level**

On an institutional level, a few intentional practices can remove the opportunity for bias and assist in eliminating implicit bias. One simple practice companies can implement is anonymous job screening of applicants. Redacting information revealing a candidate's name, address, and age, allows decision makers to evaluate the experience and skills candidates may bring to the

job. Optimally, anonymous screening will reduce implicit bias and result in employees with a broad range of interests, backgrounds, and perspectives.

With respect to current employees, implementing a structured evaluation process reduces implicit bias by allowing employees to be reviewed in the same way. The Wall Street Journal reports implicit gender bias often manifests in performance reviews, with females being critiqued for coming on too strong and their accomplishments being attributed to team efforts, while males are commended for assertiveness, independence, and self-confidence. The Clayman Institute for Gender Research finds women are often held to a higher standard in evaluations, both by themselves and the evaluators regardless of the evaluator's gender. Using the same criteria to consistently evaluate employees is one tool to reduce the effects of implicit bias in performance reviews. Additional measures to reduce implicit bias are to implement mentorship programs, examine parental leave policies, and formalize gender equality initiatives.

Ensuring diversity and inclusion in decision making, planning, and leadership is another way to reduce the effects of implicit bias. Promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace can be implemented by formal measures such as stating commitment to building a diverse and inclusive culture, banning "culture fit" as a reason to reject candidates, and offering workshops, as well as simple actions like checking the temperature in the office and pointing out interruptions in meetings.

Google, Facebook, and Coca-Cola are among many companies who now offer implicit bias training. Other companies have developed innovative approaches to eliminate implicit bias such as creating small groups for employees to discuss issues arising in their daily work lives, offering easy access to employee relations personnel, or providing mentorship opportunities.

#### **E. Bridge the generational gap when working with more senior employees**

Different generations communicate in different ways. For example, many Baby Boomers prefer to communicate over the phone, whereas someone in Gen X might prefer email. While these are generalizations, someone who can adapt to many different communication styles has a better chance of standing out among their peers. If you leave someone a voicemail and they respond to your voicemail with an email, it is likely they prefer email.

#### **F. Excel in a multi-generational workforce**

Not only is it important to understand how your colleagues prefer to communicate, but professionals early in their careers should pay special attention to when they are expected to be available and how quickly they should respond to inquiries from clients, supervisors, and colleagues. These policies vary by company, and in fact may vary within companies depending on compensation structure, state laws, and position. It is prudent to research or ask for the communication guidelines for the company and position as soon as you are hired.

Young professionals have a lot to learn from those who have worked in the field for many years before them. Often, those in more senior generations are willing to share insight from their experiences when asked. Questions about what brought them to the industry, the strangest or

most interesting claim they handled, or their knowledge of the small town where you are traveling for mediation can open up a helpful dialogue and lead to an unexpected connection.