Some Habits for Highly Effective New Lawyers\(^1\)

Mary J. Koshollek  
Director of Research  
von Briesen, Purcell & Roper, s.c., Milwaukee, Wisconsin

1. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.  
- Learn about the office, its governance, staffing, history, and philosophy.  
- Use the “Just Ask”\(^2\) method when taking an assignment.

| J | JURISDICTION  
|---|---  
You must know if you need to examine federal or state, court of administrative decisions, regulatory or legislative sources, or a combination thereof.  

| U | USEFUL TIPS  
|---|---  
The assigning attorney may know of internal documents or experts on the issues, or may have been tipped off to recent caselaw by a specialized newsletter. Obtain copies. Carry a legal pad and paper wherever you go.  

| S | SCOPE OF RESEARCH  
|---|---  
Does the assigning attorney want you to scorch the earth or scratch the surface?  

| T | TERMS OF ART  
|---|---  
Ask the assigning attorney for standard terms of art and their definitions. This question will aid immeasurably in searching digest and databases.  

| A | ACRONYMS  
|---|---  
Clarify the spelling and meaning of acronyms. Attorneys throw them around constantly, forgetting that these terms mean nothing to individuals new to the field.  

| S | SOURCES  
|---|---  
As an expert, the assigning attorney will know the “bibles” of research in his/her field. Ask for the titles of those materials to save time in the library.  

| K | KEY COST CONSTRAINTS  
|---|---  
Does this client limit CALR charges? How many hours should you expect to bill on this project? Can you use messenger services, document retrieval service, Federal Express, faces and other costly conveniences? Ask now and you won’t be embarrassed later.

---

\(^1\)Loosely based on the book by Steven Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, 1990.

\(^2\)The “Just Ask” method was created by Ellen Callinan and reproduced here from RIC materials.
2. **Begin with the end in mind: Think about your optimal product.**
   - Return to the assigning attorney if you hit a road block.
   - Be confident in your analysis and opinion.
   - Write as though you are going to argue the issue and in such a manner that the document can be sent to the client.
   - Complete projects on time or let someone know early that you will need extra time.
   - Bill your time and write billing entries with the client in mind.
   - Proofread and don’t rely on spellcheckers.
   - Dictate with punctuation.

3. **Synergize: Practice teambuilding and interdependence.**
   - Be available. Keep a schedule and make it public.
   - Dress professionally and develop your basic social graces (introductions, table manners, acknowledgements and thank you’s).
   - Ask for work before you are out of work.
   - Treat all office members with respect.
   - Build an “emotional bank account” with those you depend on i.e. support staff; make “deposits” of appreciation, trust, and cooperation; use “withdrawals” of criticism sparingly.

4. **Be proactive: Engage in positive behaviors.**
   - Look for alternatives and solutions.
   - Refrain from reactive phrases: “I can’t,” “I won’t.”
   - If you make a mistake, admit it, correct it, learn from it, and never lie.

5. **Think win/win.**
   - Don’t think in terms of winners and/or losers in the office.
   - Think of ways for all to win; but most of all ways to better serve clients.

6. **Put first things first.**
   - Don’t waste time on things that don’t/won’t matter.
   - Learn to delegate and ensure that the delegate has the necessary tools and information to do the job. Remember the end responsibility is still yours.
   - Practice time management.

7. **Sharpen the saw: Balance physical, mental, spiritual, social, and emotional dimensions.**
   - Train yourself as a leader.
   - Keep up with new technologies and ideas.
   - Develop interests other than the law.
   - Enjoy your time off!