

## 7 Career Tips For Aspiring Tax Attorneys

By **Vidya Kauri**

*Law360, New York (May 23, 2016, 6:10 PM ET)* -- For newly minted attorneys and law students with a love for the complex and technical area of tax law, numerous opportunities exist to excel and carve out a successful career path.

Here, Law360 shares tips from experienced tax attorneys on how they excel in their field and what they look for in aspiring associates:

### **Plan Your Career**

A good way to make ambitions come to life is to hatch a solid plan for how each goal can be realized, according to Michael Fried at Fried & Rosefelt LLC.

"When I say a plan, I mean a written plan where you're thinking about what you're going to do," Fried said. "Write specifically what you're going to do. ... You don't get things done unless you write them down."

Some of the things that law school graduates and junior associates should consider in their written plans include whether acquiring a Master of Laws in taxation is a worthwhile investment. BigLaw may place a greater emphasis on this degree requirement than boutique firms.

Additionally, aspiring tax attorneys should research different summer associate programs, as well as conferences and tax clinics to attend, which tax publications to read regularly, and how much time they can commit to writing and speaking engagements.

"When I see those resumes where people have done that even in law school, that shows a commitment to getting into the tax world and starting at an early age," said Lee Zoeller, chair of Reed Smith LLP's state tax group.

### **Stay Open-Minded While Carving Out a Niche**

Because tax is such an extensive area encompassing state laws, international regulations, tax planning, controversy and more, aspiring tax attorneys should take the time to figure out what sections they would find more enjoyable and what projects they want to embark on, experts said.

However, one should also be careful not to pigeonhole themselves into a particular area, according to

Fenwick & West LLP's Larissa Neumann, who excels at both tax planning and tax controversy matters.

Neumann said that since moot court, a litigation prep class, wasn't her favorite course in law school, she decided tax planning was what she really wanted to do, but ended up loving the first litigation project that landed on her desk after graduation.

"When I tried it, I realized that litigation and planning really go hand in hand," Neumann said. "You don't want to box yourself in too early when you're a junior associate or when you're starting out in tax because there might be areas that you actually really like, and you don't know that if you haven't tried them."

For those who are unsure what to specialize in, accounting firms can give more exposure to different topics than BigLaw firms, where one may end up getting slotted into a specific practice group, Zoeller said.

### **Don't Be Afraid of a Challenge**

When looking for a specialty, Shawn O'Brien, a tax partner at Mayer Brown LLP, said that young attorneys should look to areas that are more complicated and harder for laypeople to interpret, as well as areas that are in flux, such as international tax law which is facing increasing controls for inversions, profit-shifting and other cross-border transactions.

"The questions that we get in the law firm are such that you have to put together an analysis in a way that [requires] relying on different sources," O'Brien said. "Clients are looking to law firms to analyze the different authorities that are out there and try to come to a logical answer based on the authorities that we know."

Young attorneys should also strive to look at the bigger picture when they are given a smaller part of a project to work on. It's a way to think about issues that clients or senior partners might not have addressed and could lead to exploring new areas of expertise or offering new services to other clients in the firm, experts said.

"A lot of times, it's just a matter of finding similarly situated clients within the firm who may not be aware of a particular development in the tax laws. You identify that development with one client but may find another client who would also be interested," O'Brien said.

### **Learn From Senior Colleagues**

Most law firms pair up their new recruits with mentors, but Neumann said that part of taking charge of one's own professional development is to connect with other partners in the firm.

New attorneys should take opportunities to evaluate the skills that senior partners possess and learn from them.

"I tried to take certain components from a bunch of different people in different projects that I worked on and developed my own style based on what I saw working for other people, but also would be unique to me," Neumann said. "I wasn't just trying to emulate one person because I learned early that that's overwhelming and wouldn't work for me."

## **Find Ways to Market Yourself**

Once junior tax attorneys establish their focus, they should start promoting themselves, experts said.

This goes beyond ensuring they have respectable online profiles. Young attorneys should look to get involved in tax sections of bar associations and industry-focused committees and volunteer to present at conferences and co-author articles with senior partners, according to experts.

"Lawyers who are not tax lawyers learn about the fact that you are knowledgeable about something and they refer stuff to you," Fried said. "Getting known in the profession, not just with tax lawyers, but with other people as someone who knows how to do certain things is fairly important."

Fried also said that it is important to pick a small number of associations that one can make a meaningful contribution to instead of spreading oneself too thin, and Neumann pointed out that writing and speaking are beneficial in forcing junior attorneys to learn their topic "really, really well."

## **Stay on Top of Developments**

Keeping track of technical developments is very important if aspiring lawyers want to set themselves apart as experts on tax law, and this means reading up on new regulations and precedential case law, experts said.

Young attorneys should also master the art of interpreting laws that were written decades ago and applying them to modern business structures, Zoeller said.

"In particular, state taxes provide an opportunity for a lot of creative thinking," he said. "Some state laws were written in the 1970s and, in some cases, the 1960s and even before that, and they don't adapt well to the new technology of today's world. ... There's lots of opportunities for coming up with new ways to fit our new business world into an old taxing regime."

## **Keep Doors Open**

It is important for young professionals to remember that their peers in the tax world, who tend to move around between law firms, accounting firms and public service, could one day be a source of valuable work, experts said.

There is an established tax community across the country that somebody who is starting out in the field would be wise to take advantage of for career advice and job referrals, O'Brien said.

"People are willing to help and contribute and work together," he said. "I'm sure that exists in other practice groups, but I feel like in the tax area, everyone understands that they're in a challenging practice and they're willing to share ideas and help each other."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg and Patricia K. Cole.

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