

The Value of Networking for Diverse Attorneys

Shannon Liu Shair

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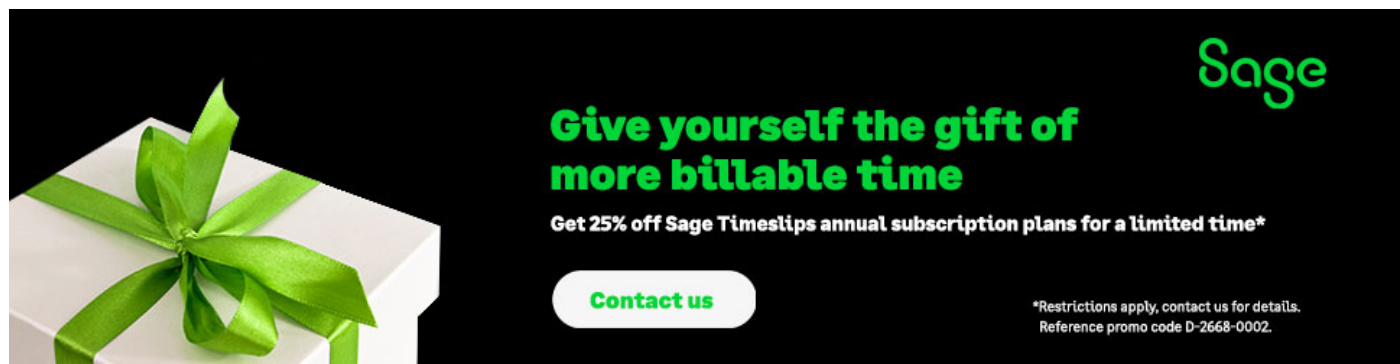


Networking is an opportunity to work on your communication skills, and it will help you feel more connected to your diverse communities.

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Lawyers and law students often see networking as an exciting process and a necessary evil. In law school, students are frequently instructed to learn how to network and often set up networking events with a specific focus or demographic in mind. For instance, there may be an alumni night focused on practitioners from specific fields or an event geared toward underrepresented groups

in the legal industry. This might lead you to believe that networking needs to happen in a structured scenario specifically set up for this purpose. However, networking doesn't have to be formal, and it doesn't even have to be solely with other attorneys.

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You often will hear that there is an unequal playing field for minority attorneys. This is most apparent when viewing the list of partners at big law firms. Although the legal field has certainly diversified over time, there is a long way to go before minorities have equal representation in the legal field, particularly in leadership roles. Networking is a major way that attorneys can combat the additional challenges minorities face in entering the legal job market, transitioning between jobs, and gaining partnership or leadership roles.

During law school, I was told that I was great at networking, even though I always felt that it was very forced. Now, as an attorney, I see networking as a way not to seek gains for myself, but to get to know others. I particularly enjoy bonding with diverse groups I share something in common with. As background, I mostly grew up in the Bay Area of California and attended college at UCLA, where I never really felt like a minority. It wasn't until I attended law school at Boston University School of Law (BUSL) that I began to see the importance of understanding my position as a woman and as an ethnic minority. There, I found it incredibly useful to have affinity student groups where students could share their concerns and similarities with others. These groups often had their own opportunities for connecting law students with practitioners.

I became President of BUSL's Asian Pacific American Law Students Association (APALSA). Through this experience, I met many other Asian law students and attorneys. I found that the attorneys who participated in national and local affinity groups tended to be very open to sharing their insights and mentoring others. Even if an attorney practices in a different area of law, that person may have valuable advice on a variety of issues.

Six years after becoming an attorney, and as a mother of two young children, I decided to start my own estate planning practice. Unfortunately, no one really teaches you how to start a business, so I

connected with other attorneys who had already done so. My biggest resource has been an online lawyer moms group. The women in the group understand the challenges faced by lawyers who are also mothers. Being able to reach out to other women in a safe space enabled me to have confidence and actionable steps to follow in my entrepreneurial journey. In fact, even more seasoned attorneys also could gain from my insights, creating a mutual benefit. In this digital age, it's amazing how you can grow through online communities targeted to specific groups.

Networking allows you to get to know others and if you put yourself out there in a positive (and friendly!) light, this exposure can help you gain confidence. Making and maintaining connections also develops name recognition with those on a hiring committee, broadens your horizons about different career paths you may not have considered, and gives you access to different leadership opportunities, both employment- and volunteer-based.

Again, I want to repeat that networking isn't something you can only do at networking events. It's especially easy when you have a niche or shared interest, for instance, ethnic issues, a special practice group, or a hobby. Networking doesn't mean you are talking to someone who holds the key to a specific job opportunity. Rather, it means listening to others' stories and opening yourself up to share your own. When you can see networking as an opportunity to work on your communication skills and get to know others, you will enjoy it more and feel more connected to your diverse communities.

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