

LEVELING UP FOR LAWYERS: WHY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND BAR ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT MATTER FOR YOUNG ATTORNEYS

By Will Amberger



Entering the legal profession is both exhilarating and nerve-racking. For many young attorneys, the early years are a balancing act spent learning the practice, building a book of business, and trying to maintain personal well-being while handling the demands of the job. Amidst all this, one of the best investments you can make isn't just working hard, it's investing in yourself and the bar.

WHY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS CRUCIAL

1. Keeping Pace with Legal Change

Law evolves. Whether it's new legislation, shifting case law, changing ethics requirements, or emerging technology, you must stay current. In Indiana, continuing legal education is mandatory. Under Indiana Admission and Discipline Rule 29, attorneys are required to complete a minimum of six hours of CLE each year and 36 hours over each three year period.¹ And at least three hours in each period must be related to ethics or professional responsibility.² These credits provide great opportunities to learn about changes affecting the legal landscape and how we should respond to them.



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2. Professionalism and Ethical Standards

Developing habits of professionalism is essential early in a legal career. Indiana law requires that newly admitted attorneys complete a six-hour applied professionalism course during their first three year education period.³ This is not just another box to check—it's intended to impart the values, relationships, ethics, and character expected of lawyers. Good ethical practice bolsters your reputation, reduces malpractice risk, and builds trust with clients, judges, and colleagues, all of which are essential as you build your practice and personal brand.

3. Skill Building Beyond Law School

Law school provides the theoretical foundation, but it doesn't teach many of the practical lawyering skills necessary for success. Many essential skills, like trial strategy, negotiation, client management, marketing, and others come only through practice.

Professional development—through CLE, mentoring, and workshops—gives you the opportunity to build and sharpen these skills. And the opportunities are endless. For example, the Indiana State Bar Association and the Indianapolis Bar Association frequently offer a variety of in-person CLEs as well as a plethora of on-demand CLEs covering essential skills for lawyers.

4. Differentiation and Long-Term Career Growth

Being known as someone who takes professional growth seriously can set you apart. Leadership roles and business opportunities become more accessible if you show up, learn, and engage. Over time, involvement in bar functions and speaking or writing opportunities can enhance your personal brand and open doors to more challenging cases, more responsibility, and judicial or governmental appointments. Some bar associations even offer leadership development programs to help cultivate the next generations of lawyer leaders.⁴



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5. Well-being, Support, and Community

The law demands much from us. Young lawyers often struggle with workload, expectations, and sometimes isolation. Being active in bar associations and seeking out mentors can help you find support, implement work-life boundaries, and gain practical advice from those who have been there. Additionally, many bar associations provide resources for mental health, wellness, and peer support.⁵

GETTING MORE FROM YOUR BAR ASSOCIATION INVOLVEMENT

It's one thing to be a member, it's another to be actively engaged. Here are ways to maximize your involvement:

1. **Join early:** Young Lawyers sections and local bar associations sometimes have lower cost or even free membership, targeted programming, and immediate peer networks. And affinity groups like the Women

in the Law Division are great ways to connect. It's easier to build relationships now than later when life happens and obligations multiply.

2. **Volunteer and participate:** Volunteer for committee work, pro bono clinics, education programs, and other bar association functions. Taking on small visible roles (e.g., helping organize events or speaking at forums) helps build your brand and your practical skills while introducing you to new people and opportunities.
3. **Seek mentorship:** Use formal mentorship programs, like IndyBar's Indy Attorneys Network⁶ or ISBA's Mentor Match,⁷ and informally reach out to attorneys you admire. You can do this via email, or by connecting virtually through programs like ISBA's Mentor City. Mentors can help with navigating common practice pitfalls, courtroom procedure, client relationships, and work-life balance.

4. **Attend leadership training:** Programs like the ISBA's Leadership Development Academy help you think beyond just casework. These programs teach you to lead teams, manage stress, engage with the community, and see how the legal system fits into and shapes the bigger picture. Those leadership skills are useful whether you aim to partner in a firm, go solo, or serve in public interest.
5. **Specialize:** If there are certified specialization programs, pursuing them can differentiate you. They're often voluntary but can signal competence and dedication.
6. **Stay consistent with CLE:** Don't wait until deadlines; instead, keep a plan. Each year, aim for useful, interesting programs, not just easy credits. Try to integrate into your CLE plan ethics, professionalism, and practice management topics, beyond just the procedural or doctrinal credits you need.
7. **Network intentionally:** Getting to know judges, senior attorneys, peers, and local bar leaders can help when you need advice, referrals, or visibility. Bar events, caseloads, pro bono work, and even informal gatherings all create connections that matter down the road.

CONCLUSION

For young attorneys, professional development and bar association involvement are not just “nice extras,” they are keys to a successful, sustainable, and fulfilling

legal career. Staying licensure-compliant and fulfilling minimum requirements is one thing, but going beyond that is what sets you apart. Active engagement in professional development and bar associations shapes not just what kind of lawyer you are, but what kind of legal community and justice system you help create.

If you're new to the profession, consider mapping out a two- or three-year plan: identify a mentor, seek leadership and mentorship opportunities, earmark CLEs that build necessary skills, and find at least one role in your bar community. Starting small now leads to big dividends later and levels up your lawyering. ☯

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ENDNOTES

1. Ind. Admission and Discipline Rule 29.
2. *Id.*
3. *Id.*
4. See *Leadership Development Academy*, Indiana State Bar Association, <https://www.inbar.org/page/lda>.
5. See *Judges & Lawyers Assistance Program*, Indiana Judicial Branch, <https://www.in.gov/courts/jlaphelps/>.
6. See *Indy Attorneys Network*, IndyBar, <https://www.indybar.org/?pg=IndyAttorneysNetworkMatchProgram>.
7. See *ISBA Mentorship*, Indiana State Bar Association, <https://www.inbar.org/page/mentorship>.