

Partner at Venable, business professor at Johns Hopkins University. University of Maryland School of Law, 1990. Started in corporate litigation and moved into transactions.

1. Everyone knows that law school and the Bar are difficult and stressful, and California has one of the highest standards for Bar passage in the country; what helped to keep you focused and your head above water? Any tips for current students?

My dad is a bricklayer, and when people in law school would describe law school as “hard”, I would sort of scoff at that. I think helping people appreciate that while law school can be a challenge and a grind, you have to be careful what you’re comparing it too. Having a little bit of context there [helped me].

I keep waiting to meet anyone in any profession who suggests that they’re underworked and overpaid. Now I’ve got a kid who’s in med school and of course everyone there says their path is uniquely challenging. I’ve got a kid who’s about to start business school and they, of course, say that business school is uniquely challenging. Having some perspective is important, and one of things that really helped me keep that in law school was when I was feeling particularly stressed, I volunteered at a homeless shelter. It was really hard for me to come back from that and whine about how hard MY life was.

2. July 2018 Bar pass rates in California saw a drop that hit a 70-year low, with 20 out of the 21 ABA-accredited law schools in the state suffering a [pass rate decrease ranging from 1%-21%](#). As a result, many students are preparing to take it again in 2019 (in addition to new first-time takers). If you did not pass the Bar on your first attempt, how did you prepare differently the next time around? If you did pass on your first try, what do you think helped you the most, and were you able to carry any of those strategies into your professional life?

I was lucky enough to be able to take a Bar prep course and just that. I saved enough money for that and it allowed me to be singularly-focused on Bar prep. I actually remember that as a really delightful summer because I had been working 30-hours per week in law school and going to law school full-time, so I was REALLY multi-tasking. So for those few months studying for the Bar, I was just studying for the Bar. I’d go to a Bar prep class in the morning, take a practice test in the afternoon, I’d walk my dog, I’d go meet my girlfriend when she was getting off work, then I’d wake up and do it again. There was a nice rhythm to it and a sort of “focus” to it. I feel really lucky in that regard, and I know not everybody has the ability to focus in that way, but it was to be able to do that.

3. After graduating, what were the first few years of your professional life like? How did that compare to the expectations you had during school?

Because I was working so actively at a firm while I was in school, I had a pretty good sense. But I was lucky enough to get a federal clerkship right after law school and that was an awesome job.

One thing I would say there is that I was THE middle of my class at a non-top 10 law school. Literally the pivot – below the top half and above the bottom. I was lucky enough to hustle my way into a federal clerkship because of an internship opportunity that I had with the federal judge. That gave me the ability to punch above my weight otherwise. So that was really helpful for me and has been a gigantic equalizer for me, particularly as I ended up in big law. Especially going to Maryland, you know, that's nobody's Yale.

4. Being able to effectively network with peers, associates, and employers is a major factor in furthering a professional career, particularly in the legal field. Are there any common misconceptions or outdated advice that you've heard regarding the "proper" way to network in today's work environment?

I'm a little insulated from the advice that people get. I sit down with students, I don't know... maybe 15 or 20 times a year. Just people who are, for whatever reason, directed to me; and I promised people long ago that I would repay their kindness to me by paying it forward. So I can't really comment on what people are encouraged to do in other settings, but I can affirm that those networking things that I was encouraged to do are absolutely vital in ways that you just don't know what you don't know.

I encourage young people who I meet with to just reach out, have lunch. One lunch leads to another. So much of getting that elusive first job is just being in the right place at the right time, and being comfortable and prepared when it happens. Whether it be young people who just reach out to me, or friends of the family, my advice is to really search out those opportunities and search them out early early early.

I never went to my school's big schmoozing events, but I have recently gone to some of those, and it's a little different when you're the partner at a big firm compared to being a student. But what has impressed me about the events now is when I meet students and they get my card, some of them follow up and try to have a discussion. I'd encourage everyone to do that. I'm always grateful for the opportunity to try to get square with the universe, so I always pay for lunch, I never say no (sometimes scheduling issues come up, but I never say no), and I end up having really nice conversations with law students. That ends up being helpful for our recruiting, and it's good for my soul. So I would encourage students not to be bashful about doing that, and to appreciate that most people (I would like to think) are eager just to have the chance to do something nice.

Those types of events are just the beginning of the discussion, they can't think that that's it. It's not a one-and-done and then a job will be handed to them. They need to appreciate that it really is about relationship building, and they need to basically develop a sales funnel. "I need to talk to 80 people in the hopes of finding 10 job openings, in the hopes of getting 3 interviews so that I can get 1 job". So you need to start with the "funnel" being pretty broad.

5. What are the top 3 things you learned as a lawyer that you wish you'd known when first starting?

I often will say to our young colleagues when they're unclear on what to do, "What would the BEST waiter you've ever had do?" They'd look at me kind of curiously and I'd say, "Because we're in the service industry, too, and you're making a lot more than any waiter you've ever had. So if the best waiter you've ever had would get in their car and drive a document to their client, I want YOU to get in your car and drive our document to our client." It's all about customer service. You can be a really good technical lawyer, but if you don't have that understanding and edge – and anyone who's been lucky enough to experience great service knows what that feels like – that's what we need to deliver to our clients if we're going to expect them to pay our ridiculous rates.

Number 2: it's not a straight line. Don't expect what you start your career doing will be what you finish your career doing, or end up being what you do for the entire length of your career. Number 3: identify something that you can be the absolute top of your class at. Let me give you an example in the corporate world where I think this is important. The 1940's Security Act is now 79 years old. It's probably pretty hard for someone who's just graduating from law school to distinguish themselves as the leading expert on a '40s act anytime soon. In contrast, something like cryptocurrency is evolving pretty rapidly. The use of technology in a transactional process and all of the complexity that that involves? Boy, at 25 years old you may have a leg up on me here at 53. Try to find those areas where you can add value and distinguish yourself.

6. What are, or would be, the top 3 skills or characteristics you look for when hiring a new lawyer? Why are those so important to you?

Here's the party answer: We are myopically focused on academic performance, measured by GPA. That makes it really hard for baby lawyers to get into a big firm unless they have really stellar academic credentials. The level of academic credentials are less important if the academic institution that the student is coming from is more impressive, but unless you're coming from a top-10 or 15 law school you really have to kill it relative to your peers.

Number 2, the firm tends to look at some other life experiences these days. I think we are much more likely to hire someone who did not go straight from college to law school, which is an interesting phenomenon that I would suggest is a bit more recent of a trend and maybe a reflection of the changing market.

Third, we really do our best in the interview process to not hire jerks. You would be surprised how unpleasant some law students can come off in the interview process. I don't know if it's because they're insecure and nervous and they think that the way to show how great they are is through bravado, but there are times where someone leaves and we just think, "I don't want to spend any time with that person". A little bit of humility and humanity goes a long way. A bit of humor helps, too. If you can be a little "human" in the interview, that's really compelling because you're talking about picking someone you'll probably spend a lot of time with, and there's not a lot of time during the interview process to distinguish folks. So we try to find some human connections and things that make us want to spend time with the person. Don't be

afraid to be real. I get that people can be nervous and saddled with student loans, I do. But ironically, they need to figure out a way to get past all that and put their best foot forward.

7. Any last words of advice for our students and recent grads?

Don't forget why you went to law school. There are lots of ways to honor that. I'm at the point now, here in my mid-50s and a corporate lawyer at a big law firm, where I'm still finding ways to honor the same thing that caused me to want to go to law school. All of the ideals, everything. About five years ago, a friend from law school sent me a copy of one of my law school application essays that explains why I wanted to go to law school, and it sits on my desk as a reminder of why I was drawn to this honorable profession. I'm trying to build the most diverse corporate group in America, and I can't control the whole world. The piece of me that said, "Go to law school and be a civil rights lawyer" is the same piece of me that now says, "Darn it, right here in this community, my 85 lawyers in my group, we're going to try to do this thing."