
Law Student Professionalism: E-Mail, Phone and Personal Interactions

Your reputation in the legal community begins now as a law student, and you should strive for absolute professionalism in each and every contact you have with professors and attorneys (your future colleagues and supervisors). Be mindful that the legal community is small, even in large metropolitan markets such as Chicago, and news of poor behavior travels quickly among legal professionals. First impressions make a lasting impact, and your reputation for ethical behavior, competence, and professional demeanor precedes you wherever you go. Follow the professionalism tips below to ensure you develop a good reputation from day one.

E-Mail

- Summarize your e-mail in a brief, relevant subject line.
- Address the person to whom you are sending a message by name. (“Dear Mr. Smith:”)
- Be clear about why you are writing at the outset, and keep the e-mail brief.
- Error on the side of being formal. Do not get too familiar (do not begin your e-mail with “hey!”) and stay away from colloquial terms.
- Do not use too many exclamation points!!!
- When you are upset, do not press “send.”
- No matter how happy you are, do not use a smiley-face (emoticons are not appropriate).
- Respond to e-mail messages in a timely manner.
- Beware of the “reply-to-all” feature. When in doubt, use the forward function, which forces you to type in the names of your e-mail recipients, instead of reply or reply-to-all.
- Sign your name with a respectful closing, such as “Regards” or Thank you.”
- Remember, e-mails live forever. Do not write anything in an e-mail that you would not want to see printed out in paper form.
- Proofread, proofread, proofread.

Voicemail and Phone

- When making phone calls, always identify yourself.
- Ask if the person has time to speak with you.
- The voicemail message on your home and/or cell phone should be professional. Don’t have popular songs play while someone is trying to reach you; use a standard ring tone.
- When leaving a message for others on voicemail, enunciate and speak slowly. Repeat your name and contact information twice.
- A number of attorneys and professionals convert their voicemails into written text messages or documents. If you must leave a long, substantive voicemail, write out your message first and practice it to avoid repeating yourself and saying “um,” “like,” or other conversation fillers.

Social Media

- Protect your reputation by selecting high privacy settings in your social media accounts to prevent bar examiners and potential employers from viewing inappropriate material.
- Think before you Tweet or post. You must take responsibility for statements or videos you make or post online.
- Do not use LinkedIn the same way you would use Facebook. They are two different platforms, and in general, LinkedIn should be used for professional networking purposes only.
- Never gossip about or comment about a client, judge or supervisor online.

Personal Interactions: In the Workplace and the Classroom

- Be forthright and honest.
- Respect everyone's authority, knowledge and contributions. This includes support staff.
- Understand that generational differences may exist between you and your supervisors, co-workers, clients and professors. You may need to adjust your communication style to be more effective when communicating with supervisors, clients and professors of a different generation.
- Turn off your smartphone in a meeting or in class. "Secretly" checking your phone during a meeting or event sends the negative message that "This e-mail/Facebook update/incoming text message is more important than you are."
- Be on time (or early) to meetings and events.
- Be responsive and reliable: return phone calls and e-mails and meet deadlines. If you think you cannot meet a deadline, communicate that to your supervisor immediately and directly.
- Maintain client confidentiality. Be careful about discussing matters or reading confidential materials in public areas, such as elevators, restaurants or trains.
- Always take a pen and legal pad whenever meeting with any supervising attorney or professor, and ask questions to clarify each assignment and the issues to be researched.
- Request feedback from your supervisor, professor or teaching assistant regarding your performance and progress.
- Treat every draft you turn in as a final work product. Even when your attorney supervisor requests a "first draft" memorandum or pleading, proofread your work to ensure that it is free from typos or errors.

Personal Interactions: Social Events

- Do not drink excessive amounts of alcohol at work engagements.
- Do not limit yourself to a certain group of people. Expand your network and introduce yourself to new coworkers or law students.
- Take cues from co-workers regarding appropriate dress at office social events, but in general, professional, conservative dress is appropriate. Strive to be memorable because of your personality and work achievements—not because of your clothing or accessories.