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# Other Duties as (Not) Assigned

## Skills and Professional Development



Years ago, when I held a different in-house position, I received a call from a senior executive at a company we worked closely with, or rather, I received a call from his administrative assistant. The executive was holding a meeting with his direct reports, and needed my help to get his meeting back on track. Fortunately, my office was nearby, so I drove over and headed to their C-Suite conference room. Once there, I was asked to troubleshoot the laptop, projector, and remote control that they needed to start their meeting. The executive had participated in a presentation with me previously, and had remembered that I'd demonstrated a greater aptitude than your average suit in getting such equipment to cooperate.

When I returned to my office, and told my VP what I'd been up to, he chuckled, and then offered me a bit of advice: "Try to avoid letting too many people know you're good at things you're not getting paid for, or they'll lean on you to get for free what they should be paying someone else to do." I saw his point, and took some comfort in the notion that he'd not take too expansive a view of the "other duties as assigned" clause in my job description. However, I also realized this advice was counter to my nature.

Outside the office, one of the hats I wear is "family tech support." Over the holidays, I helped the in-laws update their computer, changed the maps on their GPS, installed their new "smart" TV, and explained the intricacies of Netflix streaming. At my father's, I found and figured out how to replace a water filter cartridge in a refrigerator, and reattached a couple of arms on a doll that had resisted the healing efforts of others. I'd like to be able to say that this is just because I'm an inherently helpful person, but literal and figurative truth be told, I'm no Boy Scout. I like to help people, but mostly, I just like tinkering with stuff to see how it works. I've learned a few things from doing that.

In the workplace, as we small-law attorneys seek to fully integrate with our business teams, we look

for opportunities to identify valued and trusted resources. When we do, we can be so much more effective in handling complex and challenging circumstances where our team members need to quickly become comfortable with our input, often before they're able to fully grasp the underlying legal issues that prompt our recommendations.

Given that we're hired to do things that only lawyers should do, it's understandable if one thinks the path to instilling confidence in our coworkers is paved with multiple dazzling displays of shrewd legal acumen. I think it's just as logical to expect such demonstrations to be responded to with a yawn, and maybe a little irritation. We're expected to be legal experts, after all, and most people don't care for our experts to come with large egos. So, we do our best, quietly and humbly, and if thanked or acknowledged we reply that we're just doing our jobs. Sadly, even this approach may have negative repercussions, if only in our colleagues' thoughts ("I'll bet he thinks he's so smart!").

Fortunately, in most small-law environments, there are plenty of opportunities to be helpful outside the bounds of our practices. We fill in the gaps that inevitably exist when scarce resources are stretched to obtain maximum utility. It's not about pushing in to take on others' responsibilities; little good can come from that behavior. Rather, it's about recognizing when your business partners are trying to make ends meet to accomplish appropriate objectives, and applying your talent, legal or otherwise, to earnestly help them do that.

I've sometimes wondered why that executive called me for help when his own organization must've had dozens of tech-support people in the building at the time, and his call to any of them would've received immediate attention. My theory is that in doing so, he may have been trying to communicate something to his team. When I arrived that afternoon, he greeted me and gestured around the table to the dozen or so silent and uncomfortable people seated there, and said: "None of these people can figure it out. Can you?" I don't know that this episode raised the attendees' estimation of me (or of the executive, for that matter) at all, but I was happy to help. I only hope my poker face was credible.

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