

# ROUNDTABLE: Mentoring New Lawyers

**A**BOUT TWO CENTURIES AGO, THE POLYMATH BENJAMIN FRANKLIN STARTING his career at the age of 12, laboring as a printer's apprentice though work days that routinely ran as long as 14 hours. Decades later, after a lifetime of discovery and experience, he reflected on the value of what he learned on-the-job from the older, seasoned ink-stained professionals he worked with in his youth, writing that "if you tell me, I will forget; if you teach me, I may remember; but if you involve me, I learn."

Fast forward at light speed to the here and now—a complex and infinitely more advanced age than even Franklin could have foreseen—with visionary film maker George Lucas noting that mentors "have a way of seeing more of our faults that we would like. It's the only way we grow."

Once asked about the core value of mentoring, director Steven Spielberg, said that, "The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves."

Mentors, another observer once wrote, are "the personification of the term value-added. They educate, stimulate growth, dialogue honestly, challenge misconceptions, provide encourage, serve as a sounding board, and, offer the wealth of their experience free of charge."

Several years ago, in fact, the *Harvard Business Review* published the results of what is considered the definitive survey on the impact of mentoring on career professionals. The research study concluded that those professionals "who have had them [mentors] earn more money at a younger age and are happier with their career progress."

Below four young attorneys share their views on the value of mentorship and the role—or lack thereof—that more experienced lawyers have played in the development of their professional and personal lives.



**Hannah Sweiss**  
Associate Attorney  
*Lewitt Hackman,  
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## Building Strong Mentoring Relationships

"You've finished law school, passed the bar and are officially a lawyer! So now what?," asks attorney Hannah Sweiss. "You are either at your first legal job trying to get your bearings, volunteering or looking for a legal position. As you enter the world as a new lawyer, you may have already discovered that navigating many of the complexities of the legal world is more challenging than expected.

"One way to work through these new challenges is to build a strong mentoring relationship with someone that can help you as you begin the path of your professional career," says Sweiss, who currently serves on the SFVBA Board of Trustees and as Chair of its New Lawyers Section. Mentors, she says, "are critical to helping you bridge the gap that exists between the theory of law school and

the reality of the workplace. The knowledge and guidance of a mentor can provide you with the tools to avoid many simple mistakes and can help you reduce the time it might otherwise take to direct yourself on the right career path. Almost all successful attorneys confirm their success is due, in part, to strong mentoring relationships. This is particularly true for women and minorities who often experience isolation in the legal profession."

Many new lawyers, says Sweiss, don't have mentors but why? Mentoring often starts early on and many law students who go on to graduate and pass the bar fail to take advantage of the opportunities to form mentoring relationships "because they are too busy, too shy, or have unrealistic expectations about what the mentor should provide."

But, she says, “if you haven’t found a good mentoring relationship, it’s not too late to start and it may be easier than you think. One of the most important mentorships in my life was formed when I decided to go to a legal event many of my peers were too busy to attend. At this event, I met my mentor who since meeting six years ago, helped me in my first law clerk position, my first legal position and has been an important person in my personal life, taking part in many special moments, such as my father’s funeral and my wedding.”

According to Sweiss, “a big part of finding this mentorship involved engaging in the community. “Both your legal community and larger community can provide the opportunity to find mentors that you can connect with,” she

says. “There are amazing mentors to be found in professional organizations, social groups and networking groups.”

The best mentors, says Sweiss, “are those that you can talk openly and honestly with regarding any issues (legal or personal). And someone you can discuss strengths, challenges and feel safe from judgment while doing so. If you don’t have a mentor yet, I hope this will encourage you to get engaged in your community and find a mentoring relationship to help you work through obstacles in your career, your life, or just be there for you when you need to talk. Getting and keeping a mentor is one of the most important investments you can make in yourself and your legal career.”

**Hannah Sweiss** is an Associate Attorney in the Employment and Business & Civil Litigation Practice Groups at the law firm of Lewitt Hackman in Encino. She graduated from Southwestern Law School and was admitted to the State Bar in 2013. She can be reached at [hsweiss@lewithackman.com](mailto:hsweiss@lewithackman.com).



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## Importance of a Mentor

“After I passed the bar, I did not know what I was going to do, whether it be applying for jobs at local firms or hanging my own shingle,” recalls attorney Nicole R. Fassonaki. “I did not feel that I had any experience to go out into the big world on my own because I had little guidance on how to be a lawyer. I understood how to read and apply the laws that I learned in school, but I didn’t know how to really use that information in the real world. Having a mentor after law school could probably have provided me the much-needed guidance most new lawyers should have after graduating.”

Striking out on her own immediately after passing the bar, she “would have liked to receive some good solid advice and a strong shoulder to lean on when I felt lost and confused,” she says.

“Instead, I made mistakes and learned what it meant to be a lawyer along the way. Some may think that this is the better approach—learn the hard way and gain strength in my failures. Unfortunately, when you have a client on the other end, your mistakes may have consequences that outweigh the lessons learned. Clients should never have to endure problems with their

case due to a new lawyer’s mistakes or lack of experience.”

Fassonaki ended up taking a job at a firm a couple months after trying to go solo because she “wanted more experience and guidance.” Once she had “gained enough footing, I ventured off and opened my own practice with my husband a little over eighteen months after passing the bar. I currently have the privilege of working in close proximity with many seasoned attorneys, and I am constantly picking their brains for information that only years of practice can build.

“I think the State Bar should invest in providing mentors to new attorneys. I do not think every new practicing attorney would need to utilize a mentor, but knowing that there are attorneys that can provide assistance for the first year as they transition into this new career can be beneficial. Not only will this provide confidence and ease to newly-admitted attorney, it may be beneficial to clients that trust new attorneys to offer the quality of service our industry should always provide.”

**Nicole R. Fassonaki**, a partner at Fassonaki Law Firm, LLP in Woodland Hills, is a business law and civil litigation attorney. Fassonaki graduated from University of West Los Angeles and was admitted to the State Bar in 2016. She can be reached at [nfassonaki@fassonakilaw.com](mailto:nfassonaki@fassonakilaw.com).



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## Learning from the Past

“Like many legal issues, building a career can be challenging,” says Matthew D. Gurnick.

Young lawyers, he says, “quickly learn the value of stare decisis, as past cases serve as guides for pending or future issues. Legal mentorships are similarly essential when building a legal career for the very same reason: the wealth of knowledge and experience mentors possess can assist lawyers in developing technical expertise, navigating difficult professional issues, and providing emotional support. No attorney is an island—active participation in the legal community will create opportunities to learn from others who have overcome similar obstacles and are happy to share their advice.”

According to Gurnick, “There is no script for cultivating mentorship relationships. Most mentorships develop organically; however, planning ahead can serve young lawyers well. In the sports world, coaches work to put their athletes in the best position to succeed. Young lawyers can do the same for themselves: enroll in bar association mentorship programs, attend legal events, and engage with your co-workers and supervising attorneys. Sometimes the valuable connection results from several links in the network. As you get to know more people, and they get to know you, there will be opportunities to build rapport and cultivate relationships.”

Most people, says Gurnick, are willing to help, “but busy schedules and large workloads can distract even the most genuine and caring

individuals. For that reason, young lawyers must make it easy for a mentor to help. Social media can quickly and easily connect you with large groups of people. Use mutual connections to expand your network. In addition, sending messages or phone calls, conducting research, and being responsive will demonstrate that you are serious and invite similar efforts from a mentor. Responsiveness and flexibility exude interest, which is contagious. Mentors are far more likely to respond positively and offer assistance if they recognize that you value their time and energy and effectively communicate how they can help.”

“Mentorship opportunities are not solely for the seasoned attorney with decades of experience,” he says. “Young lawyers, too, have experiences and advice that can prove highly valuable. In fact, a recently barred attorney’s insight into bar prep can be more relevant to a law school graduate preparing to sit for the bar than someone who took it years ago.”

In other words, says Gurnick, “Young lawyers can be mentors too. That is the very epitome of legal mentorship—generations of attorneys passing on their knowledge, experiences, and advice to new generations for the betterment of the profession. In addition to using stare decisis to inform legal arguments, young lawyers can turn to generations of lawyers who have come before as they learn and grow, becoming increasingly able to share their experiences with subsequent waves of legal minds.”

**Matthew D. Gurnick** is an Associate at the litigation defense firm Hawkins Parnell Thackston & Young. He has also worked with NBCUniversal’s in-house employment law department and volunteered with Bet Tzedek Legal Services. Gurnick graduated from University of Oregon School of Law and was admitted to the State Bar in 2016. He can be reached at [matthewgurnick@gmail.com](mailto:matthewgurnick@gmail.com)

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## Value of Informal Mentoring

“As a young attorney, I knew very little about how to work in a law office, or what would be required of me from day to day,” says Peta-Gay Gordon. “Yes, I knew how to read cases and how to do research on Westlaw and Lexis, but I did not know the daily requirements and politics of working in an office. Due to this, I was very focused on trying to make it through the day without making any grave errors. The idea of leaving work around 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., which was considered early, to network with other attorneys, was impossible. Even the concept of attending a continuing legal education course rather than going into the office was untenable.

“I spent most of my first few years as an attorney in the office learning what was required and trying to get a grip on the practice of law. This is not to say that other attorneys at the firm or in the legal community at large did not suggest that I network, join various bar associations— basically leave my office. I thought those were great suggestions, but also thought that they just did not understand how impossible it was. I also felt like I had such little free time, and would prefer to spend it doing something non-law related. I was very concerned about burning out, or beginning to dread the career that I chose. In looking back, I cannot really say that I would do anything differently. I do think, however, that if there were different

networking and education options, I may have been lured out of my office.”

The key to engaging young attorneys, says Gordon, who currently serves on the SFVBA Board of Trustees, “is to think outside of the box. Instead of the usual networking events, where people stand around and introduce themselves to each other, maybe an outing to a play, or an activity such as roller skating, a hike, bowling, a billiards tournament, a poker tournament, board games, any activity that deviates from the norm may get a better response. As for CLEs, courses that focus on how to navigate the office environment would be extremely helpful. A big issue when a new associate starts at a firm is learning how to properly communicate with his or her legal secretary or assistant. This is a particularly important relationship that can play a huge factor in the attorney’s success at the firm and in practice of law in general.”

According to Gordon, “law schools now offer certain types of bridge classes after graduation that focus on preparing their students for law firms, especially in working for a small law firm where there is not much, if any, formal training available. For the new attorneys who do not have the opportunity to take such classes, the bar association could offer its own form of training. That would be an excellent way to get new attorneys involved with the bar association and also provide them with much-needed assistance.

**Peta-Gay Gordon** joined Oldman, Cooley, Sallus, Birnberg & Coleman in 2006 and was named a Partner with the firm in March 2013. She practices in the areas of trusts and estates administration and litigation, conservatorships, guardianships, estate planning and family law. Gordon graduated from USC Gould School of Law and was admitted to the State Bar in 2005. She can be reached at [pgordon@ocslaw.com](mailto:pgordon@ocslaw.com).

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