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PLI Chronicle: Insights and Perspectives for the Legal Community (April 2021)

Creating Positive Visibility Virtually

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Creating Positive Visibility Virtually

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From your first day in the legal profession to your last, creating positive visibility is one of the “secrets” to a successful career. In a virtual world, effectively executing this important success strategy requires even more intentionality and attention to detail. Think about investing in your career in this manner: doing excellent and timely substantive work, while critically important, is merely table stakes. What will make the difference in whether you are perceived as being a high potential performer is whether you are effective at creating positive visibility and how much social capital you can amass.

As a more junior person in the legal industry, how do you go about creating or enhancing your positive visibility? Here are some ideas for your consideration:

1. **Schedule One-on-One Time with Thought Leaders:** If you only adopt one of these ten suggestions, this one is the most important. You need to take the initiative to create virtual opportunities to inform your thought leaders about your work, seek mentoring and ask for the next assignment or constructive feedback. Scheduling a standing virtual meeting is a great way to ensure that you make the time to focus on these important activities. Prepare an agenda for the meetings so that you use the time efficiently. Demonstrate that the investment has return on investment (ROI) by following up and communicating effectively about the ROI you are receiving from his/her advice as a sounding board. Be respectful about the amount of time that you seek from the thought leader and remember to thank them for their investment in you. Do what you commit to do and report back after completion. A monthly meeting is too often if you've made no progress. Thirty minutes, especially when you are prepared, is an appropriate amount of time. Do not be discouraged if the thought leader's other commitments make quarterly meetings more viable or require some meetings to be rescheduled. Always take the responsibility to reschedule.
2. **Enter the Virtual Meeting Room Early:** The more junior/new you are, the earlier you need to log onto the meeting. You make a statement when others log on and you are already there (you can very easily be efficient/effective with the two minutes you will be on the call alone before others show up. You also get the opportunity to start/engage in the pre-meeting chit chat that occurs before everyone has logged on. One other advantage of starting the log in process early is that when the app decides to update itself, you can endure that imposition and still be on time.
3. **Be Strategic About Your Appearance:** Dress may be casual now that you are working from home but recognize the potential “traps” involved in that scenario. You still need to brush your hair, wear clothing (not pajamas or just a top) and give the appearance of a professional whose judgment can be trusted. Test your virtual meeting “picture frame” so you can assure yourself how much of you will be seen by everyone during the meeting. Do not move during the meeting in a way that shows more of you than is professionally attired. Suits are clearly not required in a virtual world, but rest assured that judgments are still being made regarding whether your attire is perceived as professional.
4. **Be Strategic About Your Background:** Sit down and think about the message you want to send with the background that you use for virtual meetings. If you can see your bed (even if it is made) what are you saying about yourself? If your background changes daily

and every picture is a beautiful one from when you were on vacation, what perception will you create? If you use a background created by a civic organization, what assumptions will be made about you? Are there dogs, children, spouses/partners walking around behind you (clothed or un-clothed) when you are on a video call? Unless you feel that you have an accurate answer to these questions, think about “creating” a background for use in virtual meetings that clearly conveys the fact that you have a workspace where you can fully concentrate and productively work from home. Virtual backgrounds are very useful and can help keep you focused on the subject at hand rather than on what judgments are being formed about the remote work environment you are revealing. Keeping your camera turned on shows that you are fully engaged. If seeing your own image creates stress, as recent research indicates, move an open window to cover your face if you are unable to hide it. As a result, you will be less distracted, and you can focus your energy on the meeting itself.

5. **Do Not Multitask on Virtual Meetings:** Be aware of the political mores of multitasking on virtual calls. Do the most senior folks check their devices while others are talking? Even if they do, do they do it on screen (i.e., do they position the frame around their picture so that you can see their hands...and what they are doing with their hands?)? Even if the mores include the ability to multitask in virtual meetings, be aware that some senior folks on the call may have a seniority line regarding who should be diverting their attention, while others may consider it to be rude, regardless of who engages in the behavior.
6. **Ensure Your Equipment Works and You are Familiar with How the Program Works:** There is nothing more frustrating than being on a virtual call with people whose internet connection is unstable, making their screens freeze or requiring multiple logins, or whose facial features are either “shadowed” so no one can see their face, or so “illuminated” that it’s difficult to look at them because of the bright light. Finally, and maybe the worst of these faux pas moments, is someone who has not checked their picture before joining and are showing up to everyone as a close-up of only nose and upper lip. Practice with the program so you know how to turn your camera on/off and mute/unmute yourself. If you are doing a presentation, know how to share your screen and have someone who will text you and confirm that others can see your presentation. If you do not invest in these purely ministerial matters, and your incompetence is put on display, you are wasting the time of people who bill minutes for a living.
7. **Talk on Team Meetings:** Virtual meetings do not allow for a “normal” cadence to a discussion, i.e., only the person with the yellow box can speak, one person at a time with no overlap of voices. Be prepared for the meeting. Create a set of bullet points that remind you of the potential points that you can uniquely contribute during the meeting. Find an appropriate place to substantively add to the discussion or volunteer to take an assignment or follow up on an idea. Know how to use the “raise your hand” function and chat window. Attending a meeting and not participating may create the perception that you are unprepared, are too junior to participate, and/or are not a problem-solver. Speaking in a meeting and being redundant or obstreperous creates a different, but still negative impression. Instead, plan your participation so that it is relevant and both substantive and timely.
8. **Show Up for Social Events:** It is always important to demonstrate that you are a good “firm citizen,” but it is even more important in a virtual world. Social events allow you the opportunity to create social capital. They also allow you to build and enhance trust with others whether they are peers or more senior or junior than you. Social events in a virtual world are intentionally planned to enhance culture and facilitate connections. Ignoring the amount of effort that has been invested in their creation and scheduling demonstrates poor judgment.
9. **Take Advantage of Training:** A virtual world means that you commute from your bedroom to your workspace. Consider spending the time you would have spent getting to the office investing in yourself by being strategic about your consumption of training available at your organization. It provides an opportunity to enhance your skill set and toolbox. It also allows you to be strategic about your choices of training instead of merely obtaining a mandatory number of MCLE hours without regard to the subject matter. In addition, it provides a real opportunity to seek mentoring from your personal thought leaders as well as an opportunity to convince them that you are strategically thinking about your growth and development.
10. **Schedule Virtual Coffees:** Do not miss the opportunity to create and maintain relationships with peers, especially the ones who you are not working with regularly. The way to think about this suggestion is how much time would you be spending on these relationships in an “in-person” world: stopping by someone’s office as you pass by, chatting in the pantry, meeting up for lunch or a beer after work, or de-briefing walking to/from meetings? Hold yourself accountable to spend at least that much time virtually. You need to invest enough time so that you are up-to-speed on them personally as well as professionally. If you do not feel comfortable scheduling virtual coffees, you could suggest that your office or practice group adopt “virtual office hours” where everyone in a set group has a link to join a virtual meeting held at a given hour each week, just to stop in and say hello to one another. Leaders will appreciate your engagement and creative thinking, even if others feel they do not have the time.

Creating positive visibility is a success strategy that, if anything, is even more important in a virtual world. Invest the time to create a game plan for integrating positive visibility into your day-to-day schedule and hold yourself accountable for implementing the game plan. Take the time to reflect on the ROI from each of the activities and then stop doing the things that have low ROI and increase the time you spend doing the things that produce high ROI. To succeed in working in a virtual world requires you to invest the time to be “seen” in a positive light.

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