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An international law firm, Seyfarth Shaw LLP has more than 800 attorneys in the U.S., London, Shanghai, Melbourne and Sydney. The firm offers legal counsel to clients of all sizes meeting their business and legal needs in litigation, employment, corporate, real estate and employee benefits.

WHEN I STARTED LAW SCHOOL 19 YEARS ago, the dean noted that “Everyone wants to be in the top 10 percent, but 90 percent of you won’t make it.” My goal was to be in that top 10 percent, and I worked hard to achieve that. The single most important characteristic of those who wound up in the top 10 percent was work ethic. That principle applies in the practice of law: Lawyers who work hard, who are careful, and who are diligent are likely to succeed, whether they are in private practice, in-house, or in the government. My academic credentials were critical to helping me stand out and to opening doors for me. Some of my success was luck, but much of it was hard work and perseverance.

In today’s rapidly changing legal landscape, it’s even more critical for law graduates to distinguish themselves from their competitors. If you’re in law school, get as much of a return on your investment as you can by aiming for high grades, law review, clerkships, moot courts and such.

This doesn’t mean lawyers should be workaholics and uni-dimensional humans. To the contrary, lawyers who are well-rounded by balancing work diligence with outside interests, family and personal health are the happiest and most interesting lawyers I know. There is a “season” for

many things in one’s life. When I was in my 20s and early 30s, it was my “season” for working crazy hours and having little work/life balance. I was trying to prove myself, learn as much as I could, and grab on to as many opportunities as I could. That provided me with a foundation to build upon. Later, when I had a family, I learned to adjust my personal expectations, and frankly, while I have a young child, it’s now my “season” to juggle family expectations and set priorities among my work goals.

A skill that should not get short shrift is people skills, [which enable you] to stand out in interviews and in your job performance. The ability to connect with all kinds of people in socially appropriate ways, to handle difficult situations, and to navigate through a workplace’s social mores can’t be undervalued.

Finally, it is absolutely true that “who you know” can be an important factor in life. Your law school classmates, your co-clerks, your early-years professional colleagues, and even opposing counsel are all potential sources of future job referrals, clients, and a rich network that can help you in a variety of ways. Burn no bridges and maintain those connections through the years in the most meaningful way you can.