

# CHICAGO LAWYER®

## INSIDE OUT

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### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE INDISPENSABLE?

**Martini:** Being indispensable means that you are essential and mission-critical. You are crucial to have as part of the team and the organization. You are absolutely necessary to accomplish a particular goal or in making it through the day-to-day. In the context of practicing law, this term is often used to refer to a particular skillset or combination of qualities that you bring to the table that makes you someone people feel they cannot live without.

**Susler:** Being a necessary, integral resource, an essential part of the decision-making team such that your input is not only desired but demanded before a final decision is made. This is essentially a client-focused concept. For in-house attorneys, the goal is to become indispensable to both the business clients as well as other attorneys in the legal department (if there are any). The same concept holds true in law firms, as you want to not only be indispensable to your clients but also to the other lawyers in the firm.

### HOW DO YOU DO IT?

**Susler:** As with many aspects of our legal careers, start with getting to know as much as possible about your client's business; this goes for both in-house and outside counsel. In addition to gaining a deep understanding of what your client's business is and how it works, get to know the business people — the C-Suite and beyond; learn what they do, what is important to them, how they do their jobs. Get to know them as people; learn to speak their language. The easiest way to accomplish this is to ask them questions and truly listen to their answers. Demonstrate by your conduct that you are a dependable and essential part of the team, as invested in the outcome as they are.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

**Susler:** If you are indispensable to your clients, you are better able to provide meaningful advice, help your client manage risk and avoid unnecessary and costly missteps. You are also more likely to be valued and retained. It also enhances career enjoyment and fulfillment.

### HOW DOES BEING INDISPENSABLE EVOLVE?

**Martini:** As organizations evolve over time, so do the workforce and the people in it. Employees have



## THE NEED TO BE NEEDED

How lawyers can make themselves indispensable

By **CHRISTINA L. MARTINI** and **DAVID G. SUSLER**

different experiences over the years which drives their capabilities, relationships, responsibilities and tenure at the company or firm. These factors all impact performance of the individuals and the teams they comprise. Hopefully, people are given the opportunity to fulfill a role that is not duplicated by anyone else on the team and for which they are uniquely qualified and needed. As one matures in their career, they can then become indispensable in a number of different ways, not just one, which helps ensure that they continue along a meaningful professional trajectory over time.

### WHAT ARE SOME LESSONS LEARNED?

**Martini:** I have learned that what makes you indispensable today does not necessarily make you so tomorrow. I have also seen instances where people spend a lot of time trying to convince others that they are indispensable without doing the hard work of actually becoming so — and then a situation arises where it becomes evident that life can and will go on without that person. I have also seen the flip side — where people are not given the credit that they are due until they leave an organization, and then it becomes clear that they had been undervalued. The moral of the story is to remain keenly aware of what you and those around

you bring to the table, both individually as well as collectively, and that you need to manage and lead your team from that place.

**Susler:** Bring solutions, not just problems. Train your clients, your business colleagues, that they need to call you regularly, even if they are not sure whether it is a legal question. Then be available to them, listen to them and provide a solution. Demonstrate your versatility in your willingness to work on a broad variety of matters, and be practical with your advice to better minimize risk and maximize the chances of a successful outcome. CL

**Christina L. Martini** is a practicing attorney, author and columnist. She is a partner with McDermott Will & Emery and focuses her practice on domestic and international trademark, copyright, domain name, internet, advertising and unfair competition law.

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