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Top Lawyers: Ankit Kapoor On The 5 Things You Need To Become A Top Lawyer In Your Specific Field of Law



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The legal field is known to be extremely competitive. Lawyers are often smart, ambitious, and highly educated. That being said, what does it take to stand out and become a “Top Lawyer” in your specific field of law? In this interview series called “5 Things You Need To Become A Top Lawyer In Your Specific Field of Law,” we are talking to top lawyers who share what it takes to excel and stand out in your industry.

As a part of this interview series, I had the pleasure of interviewing [Ankit Kapoor of Cohen Stine Kapoor LLP](#).

Ankit Kapoor, partner at Cohen Stine Kapoor LLP in New York City, attained his J.D. from Brooklyn Law School, while at the same time serving as a NYC Police Officer. He was identified as a Rising Star by Super Lawyers, is a member of the New York State Bar Association, the NYC Bar Association, the South Asian American Bar Association of New York, the Asian American Bar Association of NY, and the NY County Lawyers Associations, and is a member of the NY State Bar Association Task Force on Racial Injustice and Police Reform.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series. Before we dig in, our readers would love to get to know you a bit more. What is the “backstory” that brought you to this particular career path in Law? Did you want to be an attorney “when you grew up”?

I did not always want to be an attorney growing up. Like many people, I had no idea what I wanted to be. My parents gave me three options, “doctor, lawyer

or engineer.” So, being the rebel that I was, I decided to become a police officer. It was not until I was a police officer that I realized that 95% of my job was counseling people. Writing tickets and making arrests was the other 5% of my job as a patrolman. I also had a great mentor who left the NYPD and became an attorney. He was and is very successful. I was inspired and decided to follow the same path.

As for becoming a matrimonial and family law attorney, I chose this field because people call a divorce lawyer usually during a very dark time in their lives, similar to when someone calls 911. You don't call 911 to report that you're happy. I also like relationship dynamics and always wondered what causes the demise of marriages. I come from a family where my parents and all my aunts and uncles are still married after 30-40 years of marriage. The Indian culture is very different than the American culture, divorce is not easily accepted, so that has a lot to do with the low divorce rate among Indians. And now I know. However, I'm still learning!

Can you tell us a bit about the nature of your practice and what you focus on?

As stated above, I practice matrimonial and family law, which includes divorces, prenups, postnups, custody trials, same sex marriage issues, adoption, surrogacy agreements, and much more.

You are a successful attorney. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? What unique qualities do you have that others may not? Can you please share a story or example for each?

Three character traits that have been instrumental to my success so far (although I'm not close to my goals yet) are that I'm ambitious, relentless and resourceful. Being resourceful is probably my biggest strength. If I don't know the answer, I find it. If I want to talk to someone and get his or her advice, I call the person. This is how my mentor and I initially met. I called his office and told his assistant that I wanted to meet him and learn from him. That relationship has blossomed. Having a mentor is essentially like having a cheat code to life.

Do you think you have had luck in your success? Can you explain what you mean?

Oprah (I think it was Oprah) once said that luck happens when preparation meets opportunity. I think that I'm lucky. Luck has a way of finding me.

For example, prior to working with Harriet and Martha I was an attorney for the NYC Law Department. I was happy there and getting great experience. I was not in the market for a new job. One day, in May of 2019, after appearing many times for oral argument before Judge Lisa A. Sokoloff in the NYS Supreme Court, she pulled me aside and complimented me on my courtroom presence and told me that she felt I would quickly advance through the ranks at the Law Department. I told her I that I didn't want to remain at the Law Department and would rather be in private practice. She asked me what type of private practice I had in mind. I told her that I wanted to be a matrimonial lawyer. She then said, "Oh really? I want to be a matrimonial judge!" It's a funny coincidence but Harriet Cohen always tells me that she doesn't believe in coincidences, so I guess it was meant to be. You will see why below.

Two weeks later, the Judge asked me to join her in her chambers where she gave me the name and number of Harriet's firm. She told me to call the firm because they may be looking for an associate. I told her that I was not looking for a job. She told me to think about it. So, I thought about it and decided no, not at this time. Then, some two weeks after that, the Judge called me into her chambers again and asked whether I had contacted Harriet's firm. I told her that I had not because I was not interested in leaving the Law Department at that time. She urged me to call anyway, telling me that you never know. So, as a courtesy to the Judge, I called Harriet's firm and had a short conference call with Harriet and the three other named partners. They invited me to interview with them a week later.

Now, keep in mind that I was still not in the market for a new job. I had called Harriet as a courtesy to the Judge. The interview was at 3:00 pm. Harriet asked me how long I had been in the market for a new job. I said that I was not looking for a new job and she said, that's funny, we're not looking for an associate. Then, Harriet asked me what my five-year goal was. I told her I that I wanted my name on the door next to hers. I left the interview at 6:15 pm. Needless to say, the firm was a good match. I think I was offered a position a week later and began working at Harriet's firm on July 8, 2019.

I was offered a partnership at the new firm that Harriet and Martha were forming during the pandemic, a mere three years out of law school. And now, my name is on the door!

Sorry for the long story, but if I had not gone to law school, worked hard, proven myself and remained patient, I would not be where I am today. So, I guess you can say that I'm "lucky," although I prefer to attribute my success to date to my hard work, preparation and planning, beginning with my decision to study for the LSAT back in 2013.

Do you think where you went to school has any bearing on your success? How important is it for a lawyer to go to a top-tier school?

I don't believe that going to a top-tier school is a requirement for success. It may look good on your resume and perhaps open some doors, but if you are a successful student at any reputable law school you can open your own doors. Brooklyn Law School, which is where I went to school, is a fantastic law school with very smart students and excellent professors. If I had to do it all over again, I would not change a single thing. Brooklyn Law School was transformative for me.

Based on the lessons you have learned from your experience, if you could go back in time and speak to your twenty-year-old self, what would you say? Would you do anything differently?

Keep doing what you are doing and remain patient. And no, I would not change a single thing. Life happens as it is supposed to happen. I firmly believe that.

This is not easy work. What is your primary motivation and drive behind the work that you do?

I find my work to be rewarding although I have had my share of difficult clients and family law is not an easy field. My primary motivation is to be one of New York's top lawyers. When people have a problem and need a solution, I want them to think of me as their go-to guy.

What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now?

I am in the middle of a lengthy custody trial with many witnesses where I believe I have convinced the Judge that our client's plan is in the best interests of the child. I was born to be a trial lawyer and I belong in the courtroom.

Where do you go from here? Where do you aim to be in the next chapter of your career?

I am considering taking the Florida Bar exam in order to expand my client base beyond New York. I have ties in Florida and so many of our clients own homes there or relocated there during the pandemic. I think being admitted to practice in Florida will be a tremendous asset to the firm.

Without sharing anything confidential, can you please share your most successful "war story"? Can you share the funniest?

War story? I worked full time as a midnight police officer in Bedford Stuyvesant and East New York and went to law school at the same time. That was war! Funniest, hmm, I once tried a civil case at the Law Department and during jury deliberations my superiors decided that they did not want to wait for a verdict. They urged me to offer the other side \$500 to settle the case. So, I offered the \$500 settlement, and, to my shock, the other lawyer accepted it. No, I am not missing any zeros there.

Ok, fantastic. Let's now shift to discussing some advice for aspiring lawyers. Do you work remotely? Onsite? Or Hybrid? What do you think will be the future of how law offices operate? What do you prefer? Can you please explain what you mean?

Personally, I think the hybrid model where you are in the office three to four days a week and working from home the rest of the time works well for many people and it works for me. I often think I'm more efficient at home, but I can't say I would want to work at home 100% of the time. That's not fun when you live alone. I also don't have a wife or family yet, so I don't need to be home to help raise the children, but that seems to be the wave of the future. Most of my friends who are at big firms have been going to the office three times a week. That seems to be the trend.

How has the legal world changed since COVID? How do you think it might change in the near future? Can you explain what you mean?

You will see more hybrid models among law firms, and I think the pandemic has and will continue to revolutionize the courts. The court system is far more efficient now. Most conferences are held virtually on Microsoft Teams, and the clients like it because they don't have to travel and don't have to pay their lawyers to travel to and from court. However, trials should be in person.

We often hear about the importance of networking and getting referrals. Is this still true today? Has the nature of networking changed or has its importance changed? Can you explain what you mean?

Networking is extremely important. It's not what you know. It's who you know. Personally, I don't like virtual networking events. I think the best referrals come from former clients and other lawyers who suggest your name. I hope networking does not remain virtual because I like meeting people face to face.

Based on your experience, how can attorneys effectively leverage social media to build their practice?

If people don't know who you are, they can't buy what you sell! All lawyers should have a social media presence and people should know what you do for a living. Obscurity is not good for business, at least not for our business.

Excellent. Here is the main question of our interview. What are your “5 Things You Need To Become A Top Lawyer In Your Specific Field of Law?” Please share a story or an example for each.

Matrimonial and Family Law

1. Empathy. You have to be able to understand how your client is feeling.
2. Sympathy. You have to be able to hold space for clients during their tough times.
3. An understanding of anxiety and depression. I often found it emotionally taxing dealing with clients who were struggling with these feelings, but once I began educating myself and learning more about what's behind these states of mind, I gained insight and compassion and learned the skills necessary to help keep the clients calm during difficult times.
4. Mentor. You need a mentor in life. Non-negotiable.
5. A good support system. I think it's very difficult to be a top anything without the right people by your side, both professionally and personally. There is no such thing as “self-made.”

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might see this. :-)

David Chase. He is the creator and writer of The Sopranos, which is my all-time favorite TV show. I would want to know how he came up with the story line and what it was like working with the late, great James Gandolfini, who portrayed Tony Soprano on the show.

This was very inspiring. Thank you so much for the time you spent with this. We wish you continued success and good health!



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