



Portfolio Media, Inc. | 648 Broadway, Suite 200 | New York, NY 10012 | www.law360.com
Phone: +1 212 537 6331 | Fax: +1 212 537 6371 | customerservice@portfoliomedia.com

Secrets Of Success For Today's Summer Associates

Law360, New York (June 01, 2009) -- Being a successful summer associate requires a mixture of professionalism, enthusiasm and excellent work. The experience is not only about getting the offer; it is also about preparing to become a successful full-time associate after law school.

To really thrive, a summer associate needs to effectively navigate the complex business and social experiment that is a law firm in 2009. This article highlights several "best practices" that summer associates should consider in order to get the most out of the 2L summer.

Experience as Many of the Firm's Practice Areas as Possible

One of the most important opportunities for a summer associate is the chance to "sample" multiple practice areas. In law firms that place full-time associates in practice areas as soon as they join the firm, the summer becomes the only chance to try different practice areas.

Since the law school curriculum is primarily focused on litigation, the summer presents the first opportunity to experience, first-hand, other nonlitigation practice areas.

Moreover, trying different practice areas exposes the successful summer associate to a broader group of attorneys and work styles within a firm, different work experiences and opportunities for feedback, and provides multiple opportunities to form informal mentoring relationships as well.

Each firm will have different practice area strengths and descriptions. Some firms have fixed rotations for their summer associates, while others will give summer associates more flexibility in matching their interests to their assignments.

Some firms will have coordinators who ensure that each summer associate is getting an appropriate mix of work; other firms adopt a much more laissez-faire attitude, expecting the summer associate to speak up if she would like to try a different practice area.

Thus, a summer associate must be an informed consumer, understanding how the assignment process works and what opportunities are available.

Finally, each summer associate should try, to the extent the work flow and firm commitments allow, to avoid getting “stuck” in one particular area, even if she is perfectly happy working in that area.

Treat the Summer Experience as if it Were a Full-Time Job

Many firms treat their summer associates, in most respects, as full-time employees. Summer associate compensation, availability of work resources, assignments and expectations are usually commensurate with those of the firm’s first year associates. Thus, to succeed in this regard, a summer associate must always be as professional as the attorneys in the firm.

A summer associate must be present and punctual. This maxim applies to getting to work in the morning, meetings during the day, and even to summer associate events in the evening.

However, being present does not mean putting in face time, nor does it require a blind devotion to work to the absolute exclusion of important personal or family matters; successful attorneys do leave the office early on a summer afternoon, but only after making sure that any outstanding issues are put to rest for the day, returning any outstanding calls and e-mails, and checking with supervisors to make sure there are no follow-up projects waiting in the wings.

While supervisors do recognize that summer associates are not full-time attorneys and are still finding their way around many aspects of the job, being present and prompt are baseline expectations in a professional environment, and one’s status as a “summer associate” will buy little sympathy when one is late to a meeting or unreachable when the client wants to review the draft at 5:00 p.m.

It is also important to dress the part. Take the time to understand a firm’s dress code and its practical implementation: they are not always the same.

Is the firm’s dress code business attire, but once at work no one wears his jacket? Are Fridays “dress down” or “business casual” days? If so, it is critical to understand what “business casual” or “dress down” really mean. Are attorneys required to have a suit at work? Are open-toed shoes acceptable?

When an attorney goes to court and invites a summer associate along, not having a suit on hand might cost that particular summer associate the opportunity.

Always err on the side of being too conservative and then, to the extent appropriate, relax the dress code as it becomes clear what is and is not acceptable at a particular firm. Always remember, though, no lawyer ever got in trouble for wearing a suit to work.

Next, treat the firm's money as if it were your own. This applies to every aspect of the summer, from lunches, to taking car services home, to making supply requests. Firms want their summer associates' time at the firm to be pleasant, but it is important to be responsible in spending the firm's resources. This is an area where it is easy to make a bad impression very quickly.

To make this topic more confusing, every firm will have different standards: some will consider going out to lunch once a week the appropriate limit, while others will be comfortable with more. Firms may also have specific dollar caps or guidelines on what they are willing to reimburse.

When a bill is too big, it can mean trouble for the full-time associates who attended the lunch, with penalties ranging from their having to make up the difference to being banned from going out in the future.

Since the full-time associates will, in many instances, be the supervisors of the summer associates, summer associates should be sensitive to that dynamic and seek to avoid putting anyone in that awkward position.

The same goes with evening events. Some firms are perfectly happy to pay for their summer associates to go out after an event, while others will frown on it and yet others will consider it totally unacceptable. A firm may not provide a crystal clear guide to navigating those waters, so summer associates need to clearly understand what is or is not acceptable.

Finally, on this topic, be vigilant against inappropriate behavior. Every summer there is an apocryphal story about a summer associate who did something outrageous, usually involving alcohol, money, immature behavior or sometimes even all three.

Whatever it is this summer, do not be the summer associate providing fodder for a law gossip site. Such behavior goes beyond "expressing one's personality" or "being fun and quirky," both of which are perfectly acceptable at most firms.

Rather, crossing the line to being labeled "The [Firm Name] Summer Associate Who Did X" is never good publicity for the firm. When the firm is considering full-time offers, it is critical that great work product is the center of discussion, and not whether an offer should be extended "in spite of" what went on at some event.

Build Long-Term Relationships with Attorneys at the Firm

Making connections within the firm is another goal of a good summer associate. Every summer associate needs mentoring, and if possible should look to have a mentor at

both the partner and associate levels. Some firms make this easier by assigning formal mentors, while others leave it up to the individual summer associate to seek such relationships out. Either way, these attorneys provide an invaluable resource to summer associates.

Partners can help with the larger questions, including practice group choices and juggling project assignments. Associates, on the other hand, are often the best source for information on day-to-day questions, like providing forms, offering research tips, answering factual and background questions on a matter, and assisting in navigating the different social relationships within the firm.

Building informal mentoring relationships during the summer in practice areas of interest will also make it easier to integrate into firm life as a full-time associate. In most firms there is nothing wrong with dropping by the office of a partner or associate who practices in an area of interest to ask about what she does and why she chose her practice area. It is a great way to learn about an area of the law in which you have an interest.

Summer associate events are another great opportunity to meet additional firm attorneys and build relationships with future colleagues. Have a good time at these events, but treat them as networking opportunities as well.

A trap for the unwary is to spend an entire event just with other summer associates and not to mingle with the attorneys in attendance. In most cases these attorneys are giving up personal or family time to be there, and their time should be treated as the scarce resource that it is.

Learn as Much as Possible About the Firm and How it Works

Use the summer experience to learn the ins-and-outs of the firm and its culture, including meeting administrative and support staff and learning their roles and responsibilities. These are all people whom attorneys interact with on a regular basis, so making those connections during the summer will only serve to smooth the transition to being an associate.

It is also important to learn what administrative procedures are expected of summer associates during their time at the firm. Since the firm essentially sells its attorneys' expertise in timed increments, billing time is one of the more important tasks expected of all attorneys.

Learn how the firm expects time to be billed (i.e., in quarter hour or tenth of an hour increments, which may differ by matter), whether there are any standards for how narrative entries should be worded, and what deadlines must be followed for submitting and releasing time.

Again, since time is a law firm's chief commodity, learning this procedure is very important. Many of the administrative and support staff have relevant experience here, and developing respectful and courteous relationships with staff can help a summer associate finish these administrative tasks much more efficiently.

Be a Team Player

Law firms are not, especially at the associate level, places where lone wolves thrive. It is imperative to be a team player and to work well with others. Remember what your mother told you—play well with others and don't say anything if you cannot say something nice.

Partners want to know that individuals will mesh well with other associates when they return as full-time employees and this is a vital trait to show during the summer.

Offer to help wherever possible, support the other associates and summer associates on the team, and at all costs, avoid being the subject of, or participating in, office gossip or trash talk. Also, remember that everyone at a firm deserves your respect. Nothing is more distasteful than a summer associate being impolite to a support staffer.

Be Responsive to Supervisors and Ask Informed Questions

Given that summer associates are often treated like full-time first years, many will be faced with real client-driven deadlines. With that in mind, a good summer associate provides regular updates on his progress, returns calls and emails promptly and never puts the partner or associate in the awkward position of having to hunt him down to check on the status of a project.

Also, never plunge into an assignment without fully understanding what is expected in terms of timeline, scope, topic and final work product.

Often a summer associate will receive an assignment from a supervisor who is many years out of law school and who might gloss over areas that would be common knowledge to an experienced practitioner but not at all obvious to a law student. (These same supervisors can sometimes woefully underestimate the amount of time necessary for a young attorney or law student to complete a project.)

In those cases a summer associate should speak up and ask for clarification; no one will ever think less of him for doing so. A few minutes of thoughtful questions at the outset can prevent much frustration later.

While working on a project, a summer associate should feel free to ask follow-up questions, especially if he is having difficulty with the project. It is important, however, to take time to formulate and refine those questions.

Sending a supervisor an e-mail with a confusingly worded question will often result in an even more confusing answer, leading to an unproductive email string that frustrates both parties.

Also, if it is a relatively small question and further questions are likely to arise in a relatively short period, consider waiting and grouping all of the questions together and then discussing such questions in person. Sometimes a face-to-face discussion can be more productive because the summer associate and the supervisor can engage in a live discussion of the issues.

Produce Great Work Product

Producing written work product is an essential part of the summer experience. Written work product is used by the firm in evaluating a summer associate's strengths and weaknesses and also provides a summer associate with a way to stand out among his or her peers.

At a minimum, written work — whether it is a memorandum, brief, letter or deal document — must be clear, concise, and free of typos and spelling errors. A spell check and a skim do not substitute for careful proofreading of the document — word by word, line by line — before it is passed on to another attorney.

It is entirely possible that the document could be forwarded to a partner, a client or opposing counsel without further review, so a summer associate should treat each draft as if it is a final edit. The same maxim goes for more informal communications as well. Keep smiley faces and text-based abbreviations (e.g., “ur” or “2” instead of “your” or “to”) out of business e-mails, and remember to write in complete sentences with appropriate punctuation and capitalization.

Keep in mind that both the firm and the summer associate are each trying to determine if the relationship is the right fit.

Ideally, not only should a summer associate should make it easy for a firm to picture her as a satisfied and productive long-term employee, she should be able to picture herself pursuing a fulfilling and intellectually challenging career at the firm.

As a result, firms do care if the summer associate expresses appropriate enthusiasm in the firm as a long-term career choice. A summer associate should make it clear that she is interested not just in being a lawyer, but in being a lawyer at that particular firm. Consider also letting a firm know which practice areas are of most interest.

The 2L summer is often called the “summer-long interview,” and for good reason, as an integral part of the process is for attorneys and staff to evaluate whether the summer associate is a good “fit” for the firm.

Whether a candidate is likely to thrive within a firm's culture and work ethos can be almost as important as doing the work (and doing it well). Ultimately this "fit" is what will drive the firm's decision to extend a full-time offer, and informs the summer associate's decision to accept or not.

--By Ona T. Wang and Scott Weiser, Baker Hostetler LLP

Ona Wang is the hiring partner at Baker Hostetler New York office and a partner with the firm's litigation group. Scott Weiser is a partner with the firm's business group in the New York office and a member of the hiring committee.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Portfolio Media, publisher of Law360.