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SUPPLEMENT

Summer Associate Outlook

Tap an Associate for Information

The best advice comes from those who have walked in the summer associate's shoes

By Michael T. Hages

Being a summer associate, for most, is not easy. Granted, some people land a summer job where they can do little more than show up for work, get taken out to lunch, get paid and end up with an offer for a permanent position after graduation. For most summer associates, however, the reality is that they begin their job with only 12 or so weeks to make the most of the experience, without knowing exactly what that really takes. Is it "face time" that is important? Should quality work product be the only goal? Is the firm just looking for someone who is a good fit? These are just a few of the questions that face summer associates: Questions that are too numerous and too firm-specific to be adequately addressed for a general audience. The answers, however, are critical for making a summer associate position into a successful experience; not knowing the answers can lead to uncertainty that can be more difficult at times than the actual summer job. The uncertainty can also interfere with the individual tasks assigned, mak-

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ing the summer associate seem tentative and masking his true ability. Removing that uncertainty, to the extent possible, is a beneficial first step that can help lead to a better summer experience.

Time is of the essence. The key to speeding up the assimilation process is to use all the resources available to learn what a summer associate should and must do, as well as how to do it effectively. General sources of information regarding summer legal jobs are ubiquitous. Numerous articles, pamphlets, career services employees, guest speakers and the like offer tips geared toward helping summer associates make a good impression on their employees. While many of these sources offer advice worth heeding — like carrying a notepad for writing down important things, dressing professionally and asking questions early and often — they can be much too general for most summer associates. For example, this author is sure that at least one summer associate that had to ask a partner to borrow a pen and paper ended up getting a permanent offer. One very important piece of advice often given by these sources is that the summer is truly an opportunity for the summer associate to evaluate the firm. While getting a permanent job offer is most often a central element of what comprises a successful summer, getting the right offer should be the real goal. While many detest the idea of having to go through fall recruiting one more time, believing that the right job is the

first one that is offered, it is a good idea to take seriously the opportunity to have a trial run with a firm.

What may not be readily apparent to summer associates is that perhaps the best sources of information are the other associates at the firm. While many summer associates recognize the importance of asking associates to review their work before turning it in to a partner, summer associates may be less likely to recognize the value of young associates as a source of other critical information.

Many firms recognize the value of their associates as a resource for the summer associates, and have established mentorship programs, pairing a summer associate with a more established associate to be used as a resource for any question. To make the mentorship effective, the summer associate must know the right questions to ask. While many associates know how to answer questions regarding how to go about a research project or if there is a recent case on point, they know many more things that would otherwise take a summer associate too much time to learn. Most of these things have to do with the firm, including information about the partners and how the firm operates.

Generally speaking, partners of law firms can be some of the most idiosyncratic, particular and intimidating people, although some are perfectly normal and pleasant. An associate can usually advise a summer associate on how to

work with specific partners, including how they like research results presented, or whether they prefer e-mail, voicemail or a face-to-face conversation. Even more so, they can offer information on which partners do certain types of work, which ones are particularly enjoyable or otherwise beneficial to work with and which ones have a bark that is worse than their bite. Many also have their own stories about making mistakes and being yelled at by partners, which can help to make it seem like less of a "big deal" to a summer associate when it happens to him (and it probably will). Of course, eliciting advice prior to tackling a project can minimize instances of being yelled at.

Associates can also be good resources for the questions that summer associates feel partners are too busy to answer, which typically concern the procedure of the firm. Associates know volumes about how to keep track of time, how to organize and maintain files and just about any other procedural issue that can be encountered within a firm. Asking an associate about how to properly format a memo, for example, before jumping right into it can produce a much better and quicker result than trial-and-error.

Associates also know just about everything there is to know about firm life. Spending time with them and asking questions can tell a summer associate a great deal about whether people who work for the firm are generally happy or

lead the kind of life that appeals to the summer associate. Additionally, associates can give insight as to whether the firm atmosphere provides time for a family or personal life or otherwise meets the needs of a summer associate. These are all things that should play into the summer associate's decision to accept an offer, should one be made. Also, the possibility exists that a summer will not get any of the type of work they want during a summer internship. By looking to associates, the summer associate can determine what kind of work full-time associates really get, which can help shed a positive light on a negative experience.

For those summer associates who don't have a formal mentor (or for those who have a mentor that for whatever reason is not readily accessible) it can be a challenge to find an associate to go to with questions. One way to find such a resource is to try and be outgoing at firm functions or generally around the office. Many times this will help a summer associate find an associate he feels comfortable "bothering" with questions that may seem trivial, but are really important. Or, a summer associate could ask the partner assigning work if there are any associates who would make a good resource. It may be easier for a summer associate to approach a particular associate if given a mandate from a partner. Also, a partner's "pick" in such a situation will generally be the best choice.

A good alternative resource to associates is members of the firm's staff, especially the partner's assistants. Assistants often know as much about their bosses as their spouses or families, and definitely know the way in which the partners want specific things done. Further, they may know more about various areas of law than many attorneys. Ask a partner's assistant for advice on completing a certain assignment when you leave the partner's office. Unlike associates, assistants don't naturally feel empathy or sympathy for young attorneys, and it is not through any fault of their own. Rather, it is the fault of earlier groups of attorneys who were just a little too full of themselves for their own good. The best way to get a member of the staff to want to help you is to be appreciative, humble and friendly.

No one source, and certainly not one broadly-written article, can provide all the information necessary to reach the high bar of success facing summer associates. The best piece of advice is to gather detailed information on specific situations, and there is no better resource for this type of information than those people who have been through the exact situation before. Of course, the second-best piece of advice for summer associates is to realize that no matter how high expectations seem, they do not compare to the expectations that arise upon accepting a permanent offer, and to enjoy it while it lasts. ■