

Some words of advice for summer associates of 2009

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Welcome to the summer Class of 2009. Like the summer associates who have come before you, this is your opportunity to secure a future spot at one of the nation's top firms. Make the most of this experience, and your post-law-school future is secured. Make an embarrassing gaff, and you may find yourself unemployed.

You undoubtedly have been warned about the importance of making a good impression. Work hard, be responsive, ask good questions and do quality work. In all likelihood, if you followed these steps in prior summers, an offer of permanent employment was likely.

But the game has changed this year. Your path to success may look a little different. In case you haven't heard, the country is in the midst of "The Great Recession," and this means that law firms are cutting back.

Many firms have shortened their programs, most have decreased the number of social activities on the agenda, and at the end of the summer fewer associates will get permanent offers. There will be less work to do, and, in general, you will have less time to prove yourself.

So what is an anxious summer associate to do? Here are some ideas:

- Be very aware of making a good first impression. While this is good career advice in general, this summer many of you will have a short period of time to demonstrate your potential. Show a positive attitude right from the start. There will be no time for second chances.
- Ask good questions when you get assignments. Asking for clarification is a way to demonstrate that you understand what is being asked. It is also a way to increase the likelihood that you will do what the supervisor intended.
- Attend every social function that you can. Even if you are an introvert, don't underestimate the importance of building relationships while you are a summer associate. Doing good work is of course important. But this summer it behooves you to try and build some political capital as well. In order to accomplish this, you have to get out of your office and meet some people.
- If social situations make you uncomfortable, keep your expectations low. If you can find just one or two lawyers to talk to, that's fine. Ask about their work. Try to find out why they chose firm X. (People love to talk about themselves, and if you are an introvert, you are probably a good listener.) Talk about the function you are attending, and if you can, something non-work-related. But keep it positive. "The veal is a little over cooked" is unlikely to score you many points. In contrast, finding out that a senior associate is also an avid runner will help.
- Be proactive about seeking out work. There will not be enough billable work to go around this summer, so talk to associates and partners who are doing work that interests you. Find out who is busy, and let them know you would be happy to help. Listen for their pain points. Maybe they have form files that need to be reorganized. Maybe there is pro bono work where you can play a role. Maybe someone is speaking at an industry function or CLE program, and they need help preparing their materials. If a partner or associate talks about something that interests you, find out if they need help. Lawyers are not always the best at delegating, and believe it or not they may not have thought of it.
- Look for opportunities to "shadow." While there may not be enough work to go around, there will

certainly be opportunities to observe what lawyers at the firm are doing. Ask if you can sit in on a negotiation or join a lawyer for a court appearance or a deposition.

- Get to know partners and associates, but do not forget about paralegals, secretaries and other support staff. These individuals usually know a lot about the inner workings of the firm, and, in many instances, they can provide you with good guidance to get your job done more effectively. In some cases, their opinion of you will also count. Furthermore, support staff may be aware of who in the firm is busy (and, therefore, who may be a potential source of work).

Summer-associate programs have traditionally been a large tryout where the odds of making the team are high. That is unlikely to be the case this summer. Even if you do everything "right" (i.e. you do good work, build relationships and demonstrate a positive attitude), you may not get an offer of permanent employment. That's the harsh reality.

But that doesn't mean that the summer will be wasted or that your career is over. No matter what, this is a good opportunity to build relationships that can be helpful to you in the future. Fellow summer associates are part of your professional network. Connect with them through LinkedIn or other social media sites so that you stay in touch. In the future, who knows? Maybe you will be able to help them, or visa versa.

Also, even if you don't get an offer, if you manage to build a relationship with a lawyer at the firm, maintain that relationship. At the very least, that individual might be able to refer you to their contacts, who in turn may have a hiring need down the road.

These are challenging times, and the path to success may not be as obvious as it might have been in prior years. But you've gotten in the door, and that puts you way ahead of all the law students who did not find summer legal jobs.

Get what you can from your summer job. If you get an offer at the end, great. If you don't, understand that you have still gained valuable experience and have had the chance to begin building important relationships that may be helpful to you in the future.

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