

Articles

"Rules Summer Associates Should Live By"

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Texas Lawyer
May 14, 2001

Originally appeared in **TEXAS LAWYER**.

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Now that May is here, firms nation-wide are preparing for that annual crop of summer associates. For most lawyers at a firm, it means two things:

You can no longer use that empty office next door to store documents because it's going to be home to a would-be colleague; and

You get to charge your lunch to the firm, as long as you bring a law student along.

For summer associates, however, the stakes are higher. This is their chance to get a glimpse into the world

Sometimes that glimpse can be difficult to get because the summer associate life isn't always an accurate reflection of what a real associate's life is about. Depending on the firm, a summer associate may spend more time at sporting events and barbecues than at depositions or client meetings.

As a former recruiting partner, I can tell you that most firms knock themselves out to provide a meaningful experience to their summer associates. We use the clerkship not only as a way of deciding which students have the most promising legal minds, but also to pick out possible future partners. We're looking not only for the best and the brightest, but also people we wouldn't mind having over to our houses once in a while.

While each firm's clerkship program is different, there are a few rules summer associates should live by:

- Even if the firm isn't ladling work on your plate, try to find some way to get something substantive out of your time at the office. Everybody knows that law school teaches you next to nothing about the everyday reality of being a lawyer. We learned the law in school, not lawyering. So spend your summer watching lawyers. Learn everything you can about your firm's client base and how it services them. Notice how the partners talk to their clients versus talking to them. Note how they approach a document, revising it ruthlessly until it is ready for "prime time."
- It may sound dull, but read old pleadings and contracts. Peruse the files to see the give and take between the client and the lawyer. This also will help you understand the changes a supervisor makes on documents you create.
- Try to sit in on as many meetings as possible. You probably won't be asked for your input, but become a master of observation. Who's running the meeting? Where does he sit? Where does the client sit? How do they negotiate? This is your opportunity to be a fly on the wall. Seize it.
- If you are fortunate enough to be assigned actual legal work, run with it. Find out everything you can about the matter you're working on. If the partner is too rushed to brief you on it, ask the associate. Knowing where your bit of research will fit into the big picture will enable you to "take ownership" of the project.
- Be interested in what you're doing, rather than when the next happy hour is. If your research raises more questions than it answers, take the initiative to get them answered. Before you turn your work over, make sure it's so clean you can eat off it. For goodness sake, use spellcheck. If grammar and punctuation aren't your strong points, ask a colleague to proof it.
- Nothing turns off a potential employer faster than careless errors. Don't make them.

Articles

- Treat your co-workers with respect, all of them. Few summer clerks realize how much say nonlawyers have in associate hiring decisions. Sometimes that ignorance—combined with bad manners—results in poor treatment of anybody without a law degree. At some firms, however, recruiting directors are omnipotent gate-keepers, with more say than the managing partner about who gets a shot at one of those ridiculous first-year associate salaries. And recruiting directors don't make their decisions in a vacuum. This means you disregard diplomas when doling out respect. Treat the receptionist, the mailroom clerk and all the administrative staff in general as if they were your bosses. Not only will it improve your chances of getting a job at the firm, but also it is just good policy. Besides, nobody likes tyrants, particularly fresh-out-of-school, lacking-the-good-sense-God-gave-a-schnauzer tyrants.

Moderation Is Key

- Just because the booze is free doesn't mean you should partake of it in large quantities. This is one of those that should go without saying, but, given the frequent violations of it, it always bears repeating. Firm-sponsored parties are times to showcase your schmoozing abilities and your ability to make (and tolerate) small talk. They're the time you show your future potential partners that you can, in fact, be out in public and talk about something besides the law, and that you can be a charming addition to any gathering. You don't have to be a teetotaler, but keep it at one or two drinks for the evening. You'll want to keep your wits about you.
- Remember the business part of business casual. Business casual is a nightmare to fashion-police any time of the year, but it can be brutal during the summer, particularly among law students whose wardrobe consists of shorts and T-shirts. Err on the side of business when you're in the office. As for after-hours events, keep your "casual" dress on the conservative side. Nothing too skimpy or grungy.
- Talk and act like a grown-up. You're an adult. Make sure you don't talk like a surfer or share your weekend promiscuities with co-workers. Save the juvenile behavior for your friends.
- Don't be so busy trying to impress your future employer that you forget to let the firm impress you. This doesn't mean you rate the firm on the number of lunches it buys you or the size of its suite at the ball park. It means you give critical eye to the firm's culture, its diversity, its quality of life, its pro bono commitment, its clients, its marketing efforts, etc. One trick is to come in after hours to see who is working and who isn't. If the firm's values don't line up with yours (wherever they happen to lie), keep looking around. Trying to fit your square peg into a firm's round hole merely will serve to make everybody miserable.
- If you do decide to go to a firm that ends up not being a good fit, don't kick yourself. Statistically, almost half of all associates leave the firms that hired them out of law school within three years. While this can be murder on a firm's budget, it's still a fact of life. So if your tenure isn't but a year or two, you're in good company. Now, this isn't permission to job hop. But don't feel like the decision you make today can't be unmade tomorrow. Many firms do a wonderful job of concealing their true character until they already have roped in a potential employee. While you're not likely to find out that your firm is a mob front, a la John Grisham, you may find out that their "commitment" to quality of life was a bunch of hoey and that the partners relish doling out work at 5 p.m. on Fridays.

Enough dos and don'ts. Enjoy your summer. And try to catch a game or two in nicer seats than you'll be able to afford once you go back to school because you'll be back to Ramen noodles before you know it.