

## Utilizing Your Law Firm Summer To It's Fullest –

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT 101

If you are headed off to a law firm this summer your training and the skills that come from it will be the most important part of your experience. Lawyers are life long learners. It is one of the most exciting aspects of being part of the legal profession. Laws change, codes are rewritten and client expectations and needs change with new developments in the business world. Lawyers are not only expected to keep up with these changes but to master them in order to remain a critical partner in providing advice and service to support the evolving needs of their clients.

As a new employee of the firm, learning and development impacts the work product that you provide to the firm's attorneys and the quality of the service that you provide to its clients. Thus, your professional development is vital to your success. Most firms provide formal training ranging from general skills (time and email management, organizing case files, working effectively with administrative staff) to specifically focused legal skills (deposition training, client interviews, aspects of substantive and procedural law). These structured training programs are only one aspect of your development. They tend to provide an organized, planned supplement to the on-the-job training that is a part of the daily work assignments you receive from partners and associates.

For those who are attuned to it, training can also be more than what the firm provides in its formal and informal programs. There are simple ways to enhance the firm's offerings.

These approaches can also be helpful if you are in a smaller firm without a formal training program.

1. Use your summer associate experience to develop meaningful relationships with partners and associates. Many law firms provide summer associates with a formal mentor. Informal mentorships can also be developed, for example by seeking work from a particular attorney who is working on a matter that interests you. Approach the attorney directly, or if the firm has a system for requesting work, ask to work with that attorney. Make your interest known and make the most of these opportunities.
2. Take on a variety of work assignments. If you are not certain what department or specialization interests you, experiencing various work projects should help you to identify areas that you like best. Also, determining what you don't like can be just as useful in sorting out work that you wish to avoid in the future.
3. Be sure that you understand the work assignment before you begin your research, analysis and writing. Be prepared to ask questions if the assignment is not clear. Hearing a summary of the project, or clarifying the needed research, can assist you in determining where your "part" of the work fits into the larger work product.

4. Stop to check in with the assigning attorney if the assignment is taking longer than you think it should. Do not discount your time -- supervising attorneys take into account your learning curve when determining what to bill the client for work product produced by summer associates. They cannot accurately calculate what to bill if you don't bill your time accurately. Be sure, however, that you are on the right track by asking before you waste too much time on research that does not seem to be on point for the assignment.

Meet Deadlines. Make sure you understand the deadlines for each assignment you take on and keep the assigning attorney advised about the status of your work so there will be no surprises. Missing deadlines and failing to communicate with the assigning attorney is one of the most common mistakes summer and junior associates make.

5. Be proactive. If you complete a project and no one says anything to you that provides you with a sense of how you did – ask. Learning comes from completing assignments and from on-the-job experiences that you cannot always prepare for and from having your work reviewed and edited by senior attorneys.. Often seeing how someone edits your work or adds to it can be a better learning tool than an evaluation form with comments. Feedback is often subtle. Does the partner or senior associate give you additional work? Are you requested for certain projects? This feedback is often the most important and valuable.

6. Attend and participate in all of the training programs offered by the firm. They have the potential to not only teach you new skills but also are often taught by firm leaders or outside experts who provide training to even the most experienced attorneys. Trends, new legal fields, changes in practice processes and other exciting areas of law are often introduced at these in-house training programs. Having the opportunity to introduce yourself, ask questions and learn from the best attorneys in a particular field is valuable to your development and to determining what areas of the law might be of the most interest to you.
  
7. Meet the Clients. Take every opportunity to attend meetings and conference calls with clients. If you attend, you might first be asked to be the note taker, or the organizer of the documents. This work might seem to be clerical in nature, even with administrative assistance, but it puts you into the room with the “players” as the litigation , deal or transaction is developed. Listen to the strategies being formulated and to the analysis of the problem at hand. Watch the way the meeting's participants interact and treat one another. Each time you are at the table with the people doing the work there is an opportunity to learn.
  
8. If your firm does not provide training or exposure to an area of law that interests you, determine whether your employer has a relationship with a commercial Continuing Legal Education (CLE) provider. Often, firms have special package deals with these providers that include summer associates . Bar Associations also

offer programs over the summer months that are a good source of interesting and useful training programs. These programs are often offered free to students and can range from skills training (useful to an attorney with a client with a legal problem new to the firm), to the explanation of new regulations in a specialty practice or to emerging business. CLE programs tend to attract practitioners from many different environments – including in-house counsel and government lawyers - thus, providing you with an opportunity to meet attorneys from the local community.

9. Recognize the value of teamwork. In law school, after the first year study group approach to learning, most students study alone. Assignments are judged as independent work and you have control over the amount of time you devote, the research you do and the end result. At a law firm, teamwork is both valued for its own sake and considered a vital component of your success. It often takes time, and a “retooling” of your approach to assignments, to learn to include others in a project you are asked to complete. Whether it is a colleague, a paralegal, a secretary, or another intern or new associate, the firm expects you to collaborate. There is also a good chance that your work quality will suffer if you do not. Yes, there is a certain competition, but law firms work by assembling teams, in a similar fashion to consulting firms, to work on matters. Your ability to work with others will be noted and remarked upon. After all, lawyers are, in the end, consultants and service providers. The ability to work with the client's in-house attorneys, business executives and attorneys from other law firms will pay off.

Your work product and work ethic, even at a junior level, will add value to relations with the client and ultimately to client retention and satisfaction..

10. Be flexible. You may be asked to do work that you consider boring or repetitive. Supervisors know and understand the level and creativity of the work that you have been assigned. If you approach each assignment with enthusiasm and energy, you will be seen as a person with whom others want to work and you will be given the “better” work the next time an interesting project is available. Complainers often are avoided and do not have the opportunity to work with the most selective or interesting teams. A degree of patience, and the ability to work on unappealing projects, will be recognized and rewarded.

Success at a firm is dependent upon your being open to learning, experiencing and sharing knowledge with others. Taking risks by trying assignments from specialty areas you are unfamiliar with can be an enlightening experience. It is much like selecting electives in law school. Courses that you never envisioned liking suddenly become a passion and can translate into a life’s work.

Professional development is a shared experience. It is equally dependent upon the skill of the teacher and the interest and enthusiasm of the learner. This summer, make the most of the learning opportunities available to you. Seek out the best attorneys in the firm and learn from them. You may often find yourself the teacher as well as the student. You might be asked to research an issue or matter that is new to the department

or client. The more thoroughly you learn and analyze the assignment, the more often you may find yourself in the new position of educating the partner or associate who gave you the project. The first time that you are placed in this position, you may feel awkward or nervous. With time, you will develop a comfort level in providing the information, whether to another firm attorney or to a client. Lawyers are information givers and become the most skilled educators of others.