



Top 10 Secrets of Success from a Partner

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This practice note outlines 10 practical tips you can use as a summer associate to help you make your experience a positive one. For many, a summer associate position is the first exposure to BigLaw. As with most first-time experiences, there will be a period of adjustment and a learning curve. Although no two firm cultures are exactly the same, there are some basic guidelines for success that I've developed over more than a decade co-chairing my firm's summer program committee. The following tips, combined with your own good judgment and basic common sense, will help you get the most out of your summer associate experience.

1. Get to know as many of the firm's lawyers and other summer associates as you can.

One of the main objectives of any summer associate program is to allow summer associates to get to know the firm. That's important for a number of reasons, including because personalities can vary significantly among departments and practice groups. The summer is a time to figure out where you fit within a firm's structure and culture. The summer is also a time when career-long

relationships can first form, especially with other summer associates. Get to know as many of the firm's lawyers, and your fellow summer associates, as you can. Casting a wide net will help you find where you best fit in and build a broad network for the future.

2. Get to know support staff too.

Don't limit your outreach and network building to the firm's legal professionals. Support staff—in addition to often being kind and interesting people—can make your professional life easier. They know how things get



done and can help you navigate the logistics of the job. They can also help to open doors. Early in my career I had exposure to a practice group that was widely coveted within my firm, mostly because I became friendly with the assistant for the partner who ran the group. Unbeknownst to me, and without my asking her to do it, she put in a good word for me with her boss, who subsequently asked me to work with him. My first assignment with him went well and, over time, he became one of my long-term mentors. Perhaps that would have happened anyway, but my friendship with his assistant helped to open that door for me. Long story short, be friendly and respectful to all of your co-workers. It's the right thing to do and good things can come from it.

3. Exhibit enthusiasm.

The work of large law firms is usually interesting and challenging, although not every summer associate will find every summer assignment to be both of those things. There will be a time or two this summer when you'll get an assignment in an area that you don't think is of interest to you. Don't let it show. Most BigLaw attorneys like it when the summer associates who work with them share their enthusiasm for the work they do. For that reason, and others, it's important to exhibit a can do/want to do attitude with every assignment. Clients expect that attitude of their lawyers and, not surprisingly, senior

lawyers like to see it from junior lawyers and summer associates. You don't have to (and shouldn't) gush about each assignment (and you certainly don't want to come across as insincere). But demonstrating an appropriate degree of enthusiasm will redound to your benefit.

4. Ask questions.

You've heard this before, but law school and the practice of law are not the same thing. There will be times when you come away from an assignment meeting not fully understanding what the assignment really is or what's expected of you. When that happens—and it will—it's important to get clarity before you start working on the assignment. Go back and ask whatever questions you need to so that you understand all of the issues and what's expected in terms of timing and deliverables. If the assigning lawyer uses unfamiliar terminology, look up its meaning. If the assignor is a senior lawyer, ask a more junior lawyer who knows about that person's work style and expectations for written work product. Time is a precious commodity in a law firm; you don't need to spin your wheels when a question or two (or three) will bring clarity.

5. Turn in picture-perfect work product.

Getting it right on the substance is, of course, important when it comes to summer associate work product. But don't underestimate the impact of form too. In written work product, be sure to avoid typos, inconsistent font, inconsistent margins and spacing, and the like. This may seem nit-picky, but the visuals can and often do make an impression on the reader. For many assigning lawyers, typos and sloppy formatting signal—fairly or not—a lack of care. Here's a tip: Whenever you think you're ready to turn in written work product, take a break and then read it again one more time. The extra 10-20 minutes that you'll spend on that last read will almost always be worth it.

6. Be responsive.

For better or worse, the practice of law in a large firm is often time-sensitive. Clients expect (and deserve) for their

lawyers to return phone messages and e-mails quickly. This means that internal responsiveness can also be critical, even for summer associates. There will be times when you'll be in a training session or out to lunch and not near your office phone or in front of your office computer. Make sure that you still check for e-mail or voicemail from lawyers with whom you're working. Don't let too much time go by—personally, I think an hour is too much time—without responding to an e-mail or phone message, even if it's just to say that you're in a training session or at lunch and that you'll respond substantively later on.

7. Keep assigning lawyers informed.

Some assignments you will get as a summer associate are long-term and don't have hard-and-fast due dates. You might think in those circumstances that you don't need to check in with assigning lawyers from time-to-time because they will just assume you're getting it done. But that's not always the case. Many lawyers get antsy when they don't hear from someone to whom they've assigned work, even if there wasn't a specific due date. This doesn't mean that you need to give a daily report. But an e-mail or phone call every few days reporting on what you've found so far or where you are in the process will be appreciated.

8. Exhibit good judgment in social settings.

Every summer associate program offers social events and, with them, a chance to unwind and interact with firm lawyers in a more relaxed setting. These events are worthwhile and can be a lot of fun. But the one thing no summer associate ought to be is the life of the party. Drink (if you care to) responsibly and always keep in mind that, no matter how relaxed the atmosphere, you're at a work event, not at the local law school hang-out or a frat party.

9. Be yourself.

Some law students have an image of how lawyers in a big law firm should behave or present themselves. But the



truth is that no firm's culture is monolithic. There's no point in trying to act like a BigLaw attorney because there isn't really such an archetype. Be your authentic self. It's served you well in life so far or you wouldn't be where you are today.

10. Take the time to appreciate the experience.

The summer associate experience is unique. You'll probably never again have a job quite like it. And, trust me, the summer will fly by. This sounds trite, but it's important to let everything sink in. Take the time to reflect on what you're learning, much of which will be every bit as valuable to you professionally as what you've learned and will learn in school. Treat each social interaction as if it could lead to a long-term relationship. Every firm wants its summer associates to be successful. But, like most things in life, what you take away from the experience will depend in large part on what you put into it.



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