Tips for Having a Successful Summer

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Tips for Having a Successful Summer Experience

We are incredibly proud of Washington University Law students and the impression that you continually make on your summer employers. We often hear from interviewers during OCI that our students were the stars of that employer’s summer program. These tips should help you stay on the right track as you begin your summer and help keep our proud tradition going strong.

The most important rule for having a successful summer at a firm or agency is to remember that, in many ways, you are experiencing a summer-long job interview. Use your best personal and professional judgment at all times and work hard. Your priority for the summer is your summer legal job, not any other social obligations or hobbies. Even if your plans change and you no longer wish to return to the employer, your goal is to receive an offer and to have them speak of you in glowing terms as the “one who got away.” Make it clear that you want the job. Having an offer from your summer employer will aid your future job search should you decide to seek other employment.

Always Use Your Best Judgment

Although poor work product is sometimes a cause, the primary reason that students fail to receive an offer at the end of the summer is lack of professional judgment. Attorneys need to know that you will represent the employer well to outsiders and clients. In most cases, poor attitude or significant lapses of judgment are the cause of losing an offer.

- Mind your “P”s and “Q”s. - Be appreciative of the opportunity, do not take perks and social functions as your right, watch your language, and behave like a professional. Don’t say anything negative about anyone at the school, firm, client, opposing party or city (you never know their connections). Do not date anyone at the employer or in your summer group.

- Be Careful at Social Functions – Limit your alcohol intake, always make sure to dress appropriately, and remember that the behavior of any guest you bring will reflect on you. Do not say anything to an attorney (or their spouses or friends) that you would not say at the office. If you bring someone, make sure he / she knows the rules. Before bringing a guest, make sure that it isn’t an attorney/summer associate only event.

- Go to everything – Plan to be at every social event and in town every weekend possible. For instance, if you don’t want to play on the softball team, you can go to games to hang out and watch. It is important to get to know as many people as possible.

- Be a Team Player – Offer to take on the occasional emergency project, to take the lead on organizing a group project, or to help out a fellow summer associate who is swamped. These efforts are noticed.

- Be on Time – Be on time for everything, work and social events. The “8 minutes past the hour” rule does not apply in the outside world.

Be Friendly and Professional to Everyone

- Support Staff Can Make or Break You – Be nice to everyone, from the parking attendant to the receptionist or senior partner’s assistant. All of these people can make
your life much easier, and being rude or condescending to any support staff will be a huge mark against you.

- **If You Can’t Say Anything Nice, . . .** – Every legal community is a small legal community, so never say anything negative about another firm, attorney, your professors, or a client. You never know who is related to, or friends with, whom.

**Remember Your Ethics Class**

- **Client Confidentiality** – Never discuss a client or client matter outside of an attorney’s office. Be especially careful in the halls (even at your own firm or agency there will be other attorneys and clients visiting), elevators, restrooms, restaurants, softball games, etc.

- **Conflicts** – Keep a list of clients for whom you do work. You will need it if you go to another employer in the future. Of course, you will need to ask your current employer before you disclose any information, but it will make future legwork easier.

- **Be Sensitive** – It may be another project for you, but never lose sight of the fact that the matter is very personal and important to many of your clients. While some of the experienced attorneys may exhibit a “gallows humor” about clients, you should not (*i.e.*, don’t say: “We’re trying to get this scumbag off” or “We’ve got to finish this estate plan before the old guy croaks.”)

**Getting the Work Finished and Finished Well**

It is important to take on a significant amount of work and do it well. There will be a lot of social time, but what remains when you leave after the summer is your work product. It is very important to meet all deadlines and finish all projects assigned.

- **Work Load** – If possible, try to maintain a balance of some substantial projects where you will get to turn out a written work product and a number of smaller projects to give you the opportunity to meet as many people as possible. You need to have a nice body of work to be reviewed at the end, but you also need some name recognition around the office.

- **Specialized Research** – While your Legal Practice class has prepared you well for general research and writing, there is some specialized research (for example, tax, labor arbitrations) where you may not know what resources are available. Talk to newer lawyers in the department about guidelines and potential treatises and sources for use as a starting point in your research project.

- **Getting the Project** – Carry paper and pen everywhere, just in case you get stopped in the hallway by a senior attorney with a “quick project” for you. Carrying paper and pen with you also gives the impression that you are busy.

When receiving an assignment, **always** ask:

- for a deadline,
For unfamiliar areas of the law (which are likely to be most at the beginning) ask for suggestions on getting started with your research or if there is any portion of the client file you should review prior to beginning. Most areas of the law have treatises or seminar materials that can help you get started.

For unfamiliar work product (e.g., pleadings) ask for a sample (most attorneys have form files with sample documents). If the attorney is not approachable, find a junior associate in the same department and ask that person.

It’s always good to ask associates or your mentor if the assigning attorney has any style quirks. Attorneys are notorious about liking things in a particular format, so try to determine that format in advance.

- **Oral Presentations** – Even if there is a written work product, many attorneys will ask for an oral presentation. Try to anticipate the questions you will be asked. Make sure to go in with an outline of what you wish to say, and bring highlighted copies of relevant portions of statutes or cases.

- **When You’re Spinning Your Wheels** – If there is a more junior attorney between you and the assigning attorney, ask that person for help first. Then go to the more senior attorney if you need it. Whomever you ask, save up all your questions from your initial review of the matter, write them down and then go once with all of your questions. Make sure to ask the attorney if he or she is busy and if this is a good time to go over your questions.

- **Nothing is Really a “Draft”** – When an attorney says give me a draft of X, he or she is telling you that they realize that they will have to do significant revisions, so that you are not demoralized when they completely redo it. You need to always turn in your absolute best work product, make sure to be exhaustive in your research and to proofread one extra time. Until you are confident with your work product, you may wish to have another summer clerk or a junior associate review your work before you turn it in.

- **Make Sure You Are On-Time and In-Budget** – This will likely not be a 9-5 job (certainly not after graduation). If humanly possible, get everything finished when you have promised it, even if you pull some long hours. If you’re lost or overextended, and cannot meet the deadline, you need to tell the assigning attorney as soon as possible. Tell them on Monday you will not have it on Thursday, not Thursday morning.

If you’ve already hit the budgeted number of hours and are nowhere near finished, either you have misunderstood the scope of the project or the attorney has underestimated the amount of time it will take you (this happens very frequently). Make sure to check in and let the assigning attorney know, s/he may change the project or your hours limit.

- **Mistakes Do Happen, So What to Do?** – Always do your best; check your sources and your work and Shepardize all cases and statutes on which you rely. If you make a mistake and it affects any legal conclusions or the veracity of the work product, you
MUST admit it ASAP and offer to rectify it if possible. You cannot try to cover and cause the client to receive incorrect information. Do not assume that anyone will be checking your research.

When drafting a memo, or making an oral presentation, it is helpful if you describe all of your assumptions and conclusions for the attorney. That way, if you make a mistake they will be more likely to catch it and / or able to still make use of the work that you did.

- **Billing Your Time** – If you are working for a private firm that bills by the hour, you will have to “bill” different clients for the time you spend. First, bill all of the time you spend on the project. Employers will anticipate that it will take you longer to do things and that they will have to cut some of your time. Ask your employer for guidelines on: any expectation of billable goals for the summer; the smallest amount of time increments (e.g., 1/10th, 1/6th of an hour); how to record non-billable time (e.g., potentially group meetings, attorney briefings); and when time sheets are due.

Remember that what you write on the time sheet may go directly to the client – be careful how you describe things and make sure that the description demonstrates that the client is receiving value for the work you completed.

- **Turning Down Work** – You should not turn down work unless you know that there is no way you can do the project. If that is the case, say “Ms. Jones, I would love to work on your project, but Ms. Smith has told me she needs this first thing tomorrow morning and I don’t see how I can get both done on time.” That way, if Ms. Jones wants to go talk to Ms. Smith, she can. Never, ever pass off an assignment to another summer associate or a legal assistant.

**The How, When, and Why of the Work Week**

- **Hours** – They will treat you as a professional and you are unlikely to have specific hours. Nevertheless, take note of when most people expect you to be around. Unless you are off-site for a work-related reason, you should be around from about 8:30 to 5:30. (Note: Different parts of the country have slightly different typical office hours, see what’s appropriate for your office.) You don’t want people looking for you and you are not around. Also, work for a few hours on a couple of Saturdays. It is good to be seen and it will give you a better picture of what an associate will do.

- **Out of Office** – If possible, make sure to tell your assistant and / or the receptionist on your floor when you leave the firm floors. That way if someone is looking for you, they will know you are out.

- **Days Off** – Because you are just there for the summer, do not assume that you will have any days off (except Memorial Day and Fourth of July). If you have a good reason, most employers will give you a few days off (e.g., wedding, big family event). It is a good gesture to offer to make the time up or not get paid for those days; in most cases they will go ahead and pay you anyway. Let the administrator know as soon as possible if you need days off. If you will need to be out of town and miss a social function, you should let the person in charge of the event and summer program know as soon as possible.
What to Wear – Regardless of the dress code, keep your dress conservative and professional.

- Business Attire – If your employer is in business attire that means a suit for the men. Start with white shirts, later you can mix it up with blue or striped shirts and more stylish ties. For women, suits, dress and jacket, or professional separates are appropriate.

- Business Casual – Keep a business suit stashed in your office or car in case you have an unexpected opportunity to go to court or to a formal business meeting with a client.
  - Men: Nice, pressed khakis or trousers, collared shirt. Hold off on short sleeves or golf shirts until you check the place out. Always wear socks.
  - Women: Dresses, skirts or pants and a blouse or sweater. Keep it professional and if you are wearing a skirt, you must wear hose unless it is a long skirt. Stay away from slides or sandals until you check things out first, and don’t wear any shoes that noisily “flip flop” as you walk down the hall.

- Casual Day – No matter what they call it, no shorts, no jeans, no sneakers.

E-Mail and the Web

- Do not send any e-mail that you would not want any other lawyers at the employer to see. You know how easy it is for someone else to hit that forward button.

- Do not use work computers or Internet access to visit any web sites unless it is work related. Some employers record Internet usage – both time on-line and sites visited. To avoid costly mistakes, do not use your work e-mail address for personal use.

- Be very, very careful of hitting “Reply All” or forwarding emails to the entire firm or agency that should not be forwarded. You really do not want to be the talk of the town and the featured story on AboveTheLaw.com.

Please Ask Us!

If something comes up during the summer, feel free to call the CSO for specific advice.

CSO main number: 314-935-6451

Mike Spivey: 314-935-6471

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Have a great summer!