

New Jersey Law Journal

VOL. CLXXXIV—NO.10—INDEX 773

JUNE 5, 2006

ESTABLISHED 1878

SUPPLEMENT

Summer Associate Outlook

The Associate Track

How to impress, dress, not stress and finesse an offer this summer

By Leni D. Battaglia and
Marc Elliot Alifanz

The good news: You have nearly three months off from law school. The not-so-good news: You have landed a prime summer associate's position with a quality firm but have no concrete idea what is in store for you. Despite the myriad activities your firm has planned for you — both at work and at play — this is hardly summer camp. It is an important opportunity, one on which you can capitalize if you approach it with specific goals. As recent graduates of Proskauer Rose's summer program, we have compiled our top 10 simple rules to help keep you on track this summer. They may seem like common sense, but you would be amazed at how often these basic strategies are ignored.

Battaglia and Alifanz are associates in the immigration department and the labor and employment department, respectively, of the offices of Proskauer Rose of Newark. Senior labor and employment associate and summer associate recruiting coordinator Mark A. Saloman assisted in the preparation of this article.

1. Prioritize your goals. Though gaining useful knowledge and experience is a terrific perk, the ultimate goal of your summer is to end with a job offer. To accomplish this, you must consistently do excellent work, approach every assignment and activity with enthusiasm, and yes, on occasion, stay late to get a task done. Even if this is your first legal job — or your first job ever — do not let inexperience be an excuse for doing less than your best. Never assume that an offer is guaranteed. Recognize that your fate is largely in your hands and prioritize accordingly.

2. Keep your eyes, ears and mind open. Although you may be wined and dined a fair amount during your summer, this is not an exact approximation of life as a new practicing attorney. To obtain a realistic view of firm life, you must take advantage of your firm's shadowing program. If your firm has nothing formal, seek out opportunities to observe the end result of your work. When Partner Jane wants you to assist in preparing her for an upcoming deposition, ask to go with her — she will surely say yes. This will allow you to see the kind of work your firm does at all levels, as well as forge a new relationship. Request assignments from a variety of practice areas and a large pool of attorneys. Ask to sit in on strategy meetings, conference calls with clients, and discussions with adversaries or the

court. Make it a point to find assignments that are typical of what first-year attorneys do. While your ultimate goal is that offer, remember that you need to see if you and the firm are well matched. It is okay to be assertive. Fortunately, the actions you take to get a thorough sense of the firm are the same sorts of efforts that may draw positive attention to you, thus increasing the probability of that all-important offer.

3. Be comfortable, but not cavalier, in your working environment. You will be spending a lot of time at the office, both over the summer and (hopefully) as you begin your legal career. You will benefit by being known as the “go-to” person, not as the oddball, slacker or loner. So approach all assignments with enthusiasm, a willingness to help and a readiness to learn, and approach your colleagues the same way. Laugh at Senior Associate Bob's jokes, even if he's told them to you a half dozen times already. Accept Partner Jane's offer of coffee at the firm event, even if you hate the stuff. If you are hired, the jokes will not get any funnier and the coffee will not taste any better but self-amused Bob and caffeinated Jane will always be your seniors so it is best to start your relationships on a pleasant note. Remember, your summer program will test you substantively and socially. Professional relationships are built on a foundation of politeness, so mind your manners. Open doors for colleagues. Make eye contact when speaking. Avoid

smelly foods. Use breath mints and deodorant.

4. Become a professional. Your interactions with attorneys must go beyond mere politeness. Your goal is to be treated like a true colleague, not some kid on summer break helping out here and there. This summer is designed to be a learning experience, so learn all you can. Aggressively seek feedback. Accept critiques and criticism with a confident smile. Correct your errors cheerfully and make sure not to repeat them. Remember, you will likely be working with some highly successful New Jersey lawyers. Absorb their expertise and, who knows, you might even surprise a professor or two come the fall.

5. Find a mentor. There is absolutely no excuse for failing to find at least one attorney who will get to know you beyond your work. If your firm has a formal mentoring program, use it. If it has nothing formal, then make the effort to seek out senior attorneys whose opinions you trust and respect. At best, this person could go to bat for you at the end of the summer. At worst, you might just settle for having made a friend.

6. Play nicely with others. If you are one of a group of summer associates, befriend the others, no matter how annoying or quirky they may be. This is not law school, where you have the luxury of selectively disliking someone on a whim. Be nice, even if they do not use breath mints or deodorant (like you do). At the same time, do not worry about what the other summer associates are doing or your comparative odds of receiving offers. Work evens out in the end, and the only fate you control is your own. All of the summers are in this together, so be personable and loyal.

That said, try hard to avoid limiting your interactions at firm social events to your fellow summers. Fight the gravitational pull that summers seem to generate amongst themselves in crowded settings. Mingle. Get to know Jane and Bob

in a more relaxed setting. Amiable out-of-office conversations foster solid working relationships — that is why the firm arranges them. Firm outings can be a welcome release, but keep in mind that you remain under the microscope and behave accordingly. Keep attempts at humor and alcohol consumption in check. Do not become the subject of that summer's nationwide e-mail forward (it always happens) describing how you (literally) fell off the boat during the firm river cruise or used profanity when speaking to the managing partner's wife. Of course, always complete any time-sensitive assignments before joining the rest of the firm at play.

7. Employ e-mail etiquette. Be discreet with your use of e-mail. Remember, once an e-mail is sent, it is essentially impossible to take back. Do not "Reply To All" unless you really mean for everybody to see what you have to say. Avoid sarcasm because it does not translate well in text. Unlike your personal account, assume that someone in the firm is watching (and reading) every single e-mail that you send. Indeed, even smaller firms have Internet usage policies with which you will be expected to comply. So resist the temptation to send that outrageous joke or site-link to fellow summer associates and friends.

8. Dress the part. Though most law firms have moved to business casual attire, especially during the summer months, "business casual" still has "business" in it. Be careful not to abuse the dress code. Watch what the more senior associates wear and imitate. It is also a good idea to keep a suit handy in your office or your car. Valuable shadowing opportunities can crop up at the last minute. Bob or Jane may want to take you out to a nice lunch. Being underdressed could cost you opportunities to participate and will make an unprofessional

impression. Remember the cardinal rule of business fashion: It is always better to overdress than underdress. But do not go overboard either. By the second week, you do not want to be known as "the suit" if you are the only person wearing one. It may set you apart — but not necessarily in the way you want.

9. Ask Questions. Senior attorneys are fully aware that you are a summer associate. If they assign you work that falls beyond the range of your experience or understanding, ask for clarification and instruction. No one expects you to know everything. If you hit a dead end, do not wait until the day the assignment is due to make this revelation. Instead, prioritize and keep your superiors reasonably apprised of your progress — or lack thereof. Likewise, do not rush assignments just to finish quickly. Attorneys appreciate thorough, thoughtful work, even if it takes a little longer.

10. Follow the Golden Rule. Finally, the key to success in any firm or office environment includes treating the support staff extraordinarily well. Be respectful, patient, well mannered, and appreciative of a job well done. They may not have direct involvement in hiring decisions, but a brusque or rude remark to Jane or Bob's assistant can sink your chances of getting an offer faster than the Titanic. A good working relationship with the staff will also drastically improve the quality and efficiency of your work, and your professional life, during your summer associateship and beyond.

There is no one set of universal rules to successfully navigating your summer program. Every office has its own unique dynamic, and everyone there will have an eye out for summer associates who are well suited for (or even enhance) that dynamic. Our ten simple rules should be enough to put you on the right path. The rest is up to you. ■