

The University of Akron School of Law Career Planning & Placement Office

Tips for Surviving your summer clerkship

Congratulations! You landed a summer job! Now you need to figure out how to do the summer law clerk dance with success. The employer may have hired you for the summer with the hope that you will do good work, return to the organization when you graduate, and develop into a successful attorney who brings money into the firm or business. Consider the summer to be a very long interview. The employer's goal is to decide whether to give you an offer of employment by assessing whether you fit with their culture and whether you have the ability to be a good lawyer. Your goal is to get an offer, evaluate whether the employer meets your career goals, and perhaps come away from the summer with attorneys to add to your network, a reference, and a writing sample. What follows are some suggestions for having a successful summer.

Have a Great Attitude

From the moment you walk in the door for the summer, it is important to have a good attitude. If you think your ability to research and write is all that is important to employers, you are wrong. As important to them is your "fit" with the organization's environment. Not smiling, not acting enthusiastic about a new assignment or summer event and not showing up for work on time are surefire ways to convince the employer that you are not a good fit.

Do not talk negatively about people or assignments to fellow summer clerks, your administrative assistant or anyone else in the organization. Keep in mind the distinction between confidence and arrogance. Be flexible and accommodating with others.

Legal employers will often evaluate your attitude based on your conduct with support staff, including secretaries, paralegals, the recruiting staff and library personnel. Be friendly and polite because it is the right way to act, and also because these individuals can offer you a wealth of information on everything from research tips and shortcuts, to office decorum, to attorney likes and dislikes, to the best way to present your work. Support staff will almost invariably know more than you do about court filings and procedure. You will also learn from them the inside scoop about lawyers with whom you are working. If they don't like you, or you are demeaning towards them, this will circulate amongst the other attorneys very quickly.

Take advantage of learning opportunities. If an attorney asks if you would be interested in attending a client meeting, enthusiastically accept. If the employer offers training programs for summer associates, attend and be an active participant. Make others aware that you are willing and available to assist as needed.

Make your Work Product Excellent

It is imperative that you make your work product outstanding, whether it is for the managing partner, a first year attorney or someone in between. Start the summer on the right foot by going into the job knowing something about legal research. Take refresher courses through Lexis and Westlaw and spend some time remembering what you've learned in school.

When you get your first assignment, and for all subsequent assignments for that matter, make sure you understand what you are being asked to do. Students often do not ask questions because they do not want

to look stupid. Asking questions does not make you look stupid—spending 30 hours answering the wrong legal question makes you look stupid. So, don't worry about asking too many questions – it's always better to find out as much as you can while you have the assigning attorney in front of you.

Carry a notepad with you every time you are called into an attorney's office and write down your assignments as they are given to you. It doesn't matter if that meeting is with a first-year associate or the most senior partner at the firm – you will be receiving a lot of new information, requests, questions and instructions during those meetings. You will either look unprepared or like you don't care enough if you don't write anything down.

Do not reinvent the wheel— inquire with the assigning partner, your mentor or others whether there are existing memos or research files that may assist you with your assignment. Follow up with the assigning attorney or other attorneys on the case with questions to avoid getting off track.

Understand that there is no such thing as a draft. In evaluating you, attorneys will be reviewing your work product and may have no idea that you were requested to provide only a draft. Even if an attorney requests a draft, be sure to provide top quality legal work. Verify that your cites are correct and review your document for grammar and spelling mistakes. If time constraints require that you provide a true draft, make sure the document clearly indicates that it is a draft.

Give equal effort to every matter, regardless of whether it is an issue of interest to you, a client you are passionate about, a project for a partner you do not get along with, or the final assignment of the summer. Do not ignore deadlines. Nothing says unprofessional more than missing deadlines. If you believe you are going to have trouble meeting a deadline, speak with both the assigning attorney and with your workload coordinator, if you have one, to determine how to prioritize your work. If meeting a deadline means staying an extra hour or two to finish a brief and missing a social outing with friends, stay the extra time and finish the assignment.

Use the summer to seek out a wide variety of legal assignments and to work with many different attorneys, but keep in mind that at the end of the summer, it will be the quality of your work and not the quantity that will matter.

Finally, be sure to keep a copy of each of your written assignments, in order to remember what you did during the summer and to determine what to choose for a writing sample for future employers.

Find a Mentor

While many legal employers establish formal mentor relationships between summer associates and attorneys, others do not. In either case, it is critically important to seek out an attorney whom you particularly admire and spend some time getting to know him or her. In addition to hopefully serving as a reference for you in the future, this person can also be a sounding board for you during the course of the summer to provide you with advice about particular issues you may face and about your career in general. For many students, developing a bond with a mentor makes the difference between a good summer and a great summer.

Use Common Sense

Throughout the summer you are being evaluated on both your fit with the employer and your ability to do the legal work. The hiring committee is considering whether they would trust you to handle clients in a professional manner. Use the social activities during the summer to demonstrate that you have common sense and a level of maturity. While it is important to attend most of the social functions sponsored by the

firm to demonstrate your enthusiasm and interest, use your common sense. Do not get drunk, do not use profanity and do not make statements that may be construed as sexual overtures or as insensitive to any group. Use common sense when dealing with client matters as well. Remember that you have an important obligation to maintain confidentiality for the firm's clients and the matters on which you work. Do not discuss cases that you are working on with your friends or family, or with colleagues in a public setting. Watch what you say and who you talk about in the elevator and in the firm's hallways.

Be Proactive

While your employer is interested in making sure you have a good summer experience, it is your responsibility to seek out the type of work you want. Decide before the summer what you hope to learn and what skills you hope to develop. If feedback is not provided to you, seek it out. If you hear about a particularly interesting case, make it known that you would be happy to assist. If there are certain attorneys with whom you wish to work, make an effort to meet them and discuss your interests. Be careful, however, not to come across as a "gunner." Be enthusiastic and responsible on all matters you work on, whether they are with the managing partner or a first-year associate. Take responsibility for your own success.

Finish Strong

At the end of the summer (or soon thereafter) firms will give offers to their summer associates. Whether or not you plan to return to your firm, it is useful for you to obtain an offer. Having an offer under your belt will enable you to speak freely with prospective employers about your summer experience without worrying about how to handle questions that may arise about your offer status. If it turns out that you do not receive an offer at the end of the summer, accept the news politely; ask for constructive criticism so you have an understanding of what went wrong; and come speak with a member of the CPPO staff upon your return to school.

Top Ten Summer Associate Mistakes

1. Be inflexible
2. Confuse priorities
3. Socialize excessively
4. Miss deadlines
5. Abuse support staff
6. Trivialize associates
7. Be inconsiderate
8. Be competitive with other summer associates
9. Disappear
10. Procrastinate

Taken from advice provided by Carol Sprague, Director of Legal Hiring, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom in the *Miami Daily Business Review*, June 2, 2000.

Tips from Cleveland-area law firm recruiting coordinators

1. Get face-to-face time with the lawyers you are working with. Talk with them in person. Do not rely on e-mails to ask questions or deliver your assignments. Let them get to know you.
2. Show enthusiasm for the work you are doing and for the employer. Act like you want to be there.

3. Don't miss deadlines!
4. Don't let yourself get overloaded. Go to the partners/those who are assigning your work before that happens.
5. Watch what you say in the elevators and in the hallways. And when you see colleagues in the hallways or on the elevators, make eye contact and speak to them.
6. Get to know other lawyers within the organization even if they are not the ones giving you assignments.
7. Realize and accept that there is a generation gap between you and the partners/senior attorneys within the organization and that the partners/senior attorneys are NOT going to change. Older attorneys like in person and phone contact, not e-mail all the time. Younger associates/attorneys have to be the ones who change their behavior.
8. Be sure that when you do use e-mails to communicate, that those e-mails are formal and professional.
9. Beware of the dangers of "REPLY ALL"
10. Dress professionally in appropriate business attire even on "casual" days.
11. View your summer law clerk/summer associate position as one very long job interview.
12. Summer law clerks are held to a higher standard than all other associates so don't be the last one to arrive in the morning and the first one to leave at night.
13. Be careful of social situations. Attend all firm social functions and socialize at events. Be part of the team, but don't get drunk or behave inappropriately. Know your audience and who is at the party. See Tip # 11 above.