

The Honeymoon Is Over. Now What?

Five Questions and Answers for Summer Associates to Prepare Them for Life as an Associate

BY BRUCE D. ARMON

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BRUCE D. ARMON is the hiring partner for Saul Ewing and vice office managing partner for the firm's Philadelphia office. He concentrates his practice in corporate health care law. He can be contacted by e-mailing barmon@saul.com.

Yes, we know that the 2008 Summer Program is not complete. We also know that many, if not all of you, will get offers from your respective law firms and be excited to officially start your careers as attorneys.

When you begin your career as an attorney, you will be starting over, even though you may have spent ten weeks participating in the firm's summer program. All new attorneys face similar issues when making the transition from summer associate to attorney, including the stress and insecurity that accompany new professional responsibilities and demands. This transition is often compared to the transition that occurs in a marriage between the "honeymoon" phase and the "reality of marriage" phase. In order for any "marriage" to flourish during this transition both partners need to have realistic expectations and must be willing to work at nurturing the relationship. The following questions and answers will help prepare you to make a smooth transition from summer associate to attorney by giving you tips on what to expect and look for during your summer experience and how you can start nurturing the law firm/attorney relationship now.

Q: How do I know what is "typical" Associate work?

A: The first thing to understand about "typical" associate work is that there is no such thing as "typical" associate work!

A summer associate's contribution to a project will vary greatly. Some projects will call for a high level input with a great deal of the "leg work" being done by that summer associate (often times with other associates and partners working alongside). Others will require the summer associate to do everything from identifying issues, researching those issues and doing initial (and in some cases final) drafts of either pleadings (in the litigation world) or contracts (in the transactional world). Additionally, in many cases where a summer associate takes on a more prominent role, he/she may be asked to deal directly with the client. Some projects will require a more piecemeal effort, with the workload being primarily discrete research or writing projects. In these situations, a summer associate may be pulled into a project and given just enough information to perform a specified task such as researching and drafting a memo to a partner who will in turn use that research to draft pleadings, contracts and other documents. In many ways, this will directly parallel the involvement a young associate would have.

Q: As a potential litigator, will I ever see the inside of a courtroom?

A: With the number of cases that settle before trial or enter into alternative dispute resolution these days, many litigators-to-be wonder whether they will actually gain meaningful courtroom experience. Some litigation associates serve as second-chair at trials within months of their arrival at the firm, while others can be at a firm for 3-4 years before a trial opportunity arises. If associates truly want to spend time at trial, they should investigate who the “trial lawyers” are at their firms. They should get to know these attorneys, find out which cases at the firm are currently slated to go to trial, and ask to be a part of the trial team. Firms and partners appreciate this type of enthusiasm, and even if there are no opportunities available at the moment, the associate will be remembered in the future. Persistence pays off!

Remember, courtroom experience is not limited to trials. There are numerous other opportunities to appear in court before a judge and/or display your oral advocacy skills. These include arguing smaller discovery or dispositive motions on the way to trial. In addition, there may be a number of pro bono opportunities, many of which can provide young litigators with a great deal of courtroom experience.

Q: How do I juggle my work load and enjoy the social activities?

A: Socializing is an important part of any summer associate program. In some circumstances, summer associates will spend as much time and effort getting to know the attorneys at their respective firms socially as they do billing hours during the summer. At times, it can feel like the summer program is a ten-week social event, with work projects interspersed. Is it reasonable to expect that pattern to continue once you return to the firm for your first year? No, that's not reasonable. But, it is important to remember that during your summer program, those were real attorneys with whom you were socializing. Law students do not magically turn into antisocial robots once they receive that sheepskin and pass the bar exam. So, there are plenty of opportunities to have some fun with your colleagues once you begin working full-time. Perhaps not as much as during the summer, but hey, summer camp can only last so long.

Q: How can summer associates integrate themselves with attorneys and summer associates in the firm's other offices?

A: Your firm's summer program should provide you with plenty of opportunities for you to work with as many attorneys in the firm as possible. After that, it's up to you to take full advantage of the opportunities offered. When summer projects are being handed out, look for assignments that will let you work with attorneys in other offices. If no assignments are available from the other offices, check out the firm's website to see if any attorneys in other firm offices have practices that interest you, then reach out to the attorney or project coordinator to see if there is any way you can assist them. If there is no work available, contact those attorneys to introduce yourself and ask if you can have a few minutes to better understand their practice. Talk to the head of the summer program about important assignments or matters and express an interest in getting involved. Attend all social events or firm-wide functions unless you've got a work deadline that can't be avoided. When you're at a function, introduce yourself to anyone you don't know, then spend at least five minutes to learn

about them. The most important thing to remember is that the summer program is your opportunity to get to know the firm, and vice versa, and it's up to you to take a deep breath, step out of your comfort zone and make the most of every opportunity.

Q: When will I start getting significant client exposure and how can I improve my chances of client interaction?

A: The ink on your diploma has barely dried. Don't expect to be meeting with a Fortune 500 president just yet...but be ready. A new associate's client exposure will vary depending on a numbers of factors: his or her departmental assignment, the work project involved and the attorney team assigned thereto, the supervising attorney's *modus operandi* and the strengths of the individual attorney to name a few. Some new associates will be thrust into client situations immediately, while others may toil in the library for months (even years) before meeting a client.

To improve your chances, engender confidence from your supervising attorneys. They will serve as your gateway to the client and will determine the degree to which you will interact with the client. Be smart. Look the part. Act the part. Seize the opportunities that come your way. For instance, accept that last minute invitation to attend a ball game with a partner and her client or volunteer to attend a client meeting to take notes or coordinate a Power Point presentation. Whatever the situation, watch for verbal (and non-verbal) cues from the supervising attorneys. Don't overstep boundaries. If appropriate, forge connections and develop rapport with junior members of the client's team - they may come to rely on you. Of course, while waiting for these client opportunities, be proactive and show initiative. Look for ways to hone your client-relation skills. Volunteer for a *pro bono* assignment or take advantage of in-house training and/or CLE classes on client relations. Your experience and knowledge will serve you well when you get your chance with a client.

In addition to these practical considerations, you may also be wondering, "How will I know if I will like working here as a First-Year Associate as much as I enjoy being a Summer Associate?" The short answer to this question is that one can never really know for sure. However, there are some things a summer associate can do to increase his or her chances of getting a true picture of the firm.

For one, find someone you like and whose opinion you trust, and ask them how their lives as associates differ from the one they had as a summer at the firm. While they no doubt work harder as associates, do they nevertheless feel respected and well-treated? Do they enjoy the type of work and responsibility they are getting? Second, keep your eyes and ears open. Do partners and associates seem to socialize outside the office, or at least mingle easily inside the office? Do people seem to genuinely like each other? Is it a common sight to see closed doors? Do the firm's lawyers, including partners, attend the events planned around the summer program? Are the lawyers at their desks crazy hours? Do you ever see lawyers taking vacations, or talking about time spent out of the office? How do the lawyers seem to treat their assistants and other members of the firm's staff? Observations on all of these points can offer good clues to whether a firm is a well-functioning place, and what the life is like for the lawyers who work there.

Most law firms understand the intrinsic value of the summer program. It is an opportunity to expose talented law students to the challenging work they will handle for clients, and simultaneously make sure the groundwork is laid for a successful long-term professional relationship. While the honeymoon of a summer program cannot last forever, you can make sure that there are many anniversaries with your law firm and get to relive your summer experience vicariously each year with the firm's new class of summer associates.

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