

## SUMMER ASSOCIATES *Outlook*

### Summer Associates Can Stand Out By Balancing Fear With Enthusiasm

By Ari L. Kaplan

**B**y day, Dan Ross is a high school math teacher in Piscataway, but by night, he is a 3L evening student at Rutgers School of Law in Newark preparing for a 10-week job interview as a summer associate at 115-lawyer Norris McLaughlin & Marcus, P.A., in Bridgewater. Echoing the feelings of most budding barristers this year, he notes, “I am excited to get a broad understanding of various types of legal practice, but I am concerned about the economy.” After speaking to colleagues on the *Rutgers Law Review* about rescinded offers, deferrals and shortened summer programs, Ross’s concern is justified.

The year 2009 will be remembered in the annals of legal history as the great balancing act for summer associates. In fact, “There is going to be a new dynamic that we have never seen before,” says Brian Dalton, managing editor at Vault, a career services publisher of 120 different

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*Kaplan, author of The Opportunity Maker: Strategies for Inspiring Your Legal Career Through Creative Networking and Business Development (Thomson-West, 2008), helps law students and legal professionals establish dynamic relationships with decision-makers, foster long-term interaction and stand out in today’s stagnant economy.*

titles, including *Vault Guide to the Top 100 Law Firms*, based on an annual survey of about 20,000 law firm associates, as well as the *Mid-Atlantic Guide* focusing on many New Jersey-based law firms, among others. “Associates are going to have to strike a balance between being an eager associate willing to be flexible and a second-year law student desperate for an offer,” he adds, noting that firms still want confident first-year associates.

Despite a culture where summer associate programs have become synonymous with lavish meals, Broadway shows and baseball games, there will be a renewed emphasis on work product, attitude and creativity during this year’s eight- (sometimes 10- or 12-) week sessions for law students across the country. “The expectations for work are going to be different than they have been in the past,” predicts Dalton. With the strongest buyer’s market for legal talent in years, he expects firms to be more stringent in making assessments of summer associates as lawyers.

For that reason, they are going to treat them like practitioners whenever possible. Pat Collins, the partner-in-charge of Norris McLaughlin’s two summer associates, says, “We want to give them a snapshot of what it is like to be a junior attorney at the firm.” As part of their training, Ross and his colleague will participate in cases through Legal Services of Northwest Jersey as a court rule in the

state allows law students to handle a variety of matters with supervision.

Although firms want to give a diverse workload, “there may be more focus on certain types of work,” says Collins. “If someone has an interest in bankruptcy, this may be a year to get a lot of opportunity,” he added.

Opportunity is the key and there are a few strategies that summers can incorporate to ensure that they maximize their chances of gaining experience and securing an offer.

#### Be Proactive

Summer hires should volunteer for assignments and express a sincere interest in different practice areas. “Law firms are not going to accommodate wallflowers the way they have in the past because there is not as much work as there used to be,” cautions Dalton. He recommends that summer associates also take a team-oriented approach to their work. “It is all attitude because you are not expected to know anything in terms of the relevant practice of law,” he adds.

#### Use the Internet To Adapt

Be open to filling a role for which the firm is looking, rather than to rigidly adhere to a specific subject, particularly one that is slower due to the economic downturn.

Use the Internet to help familiarize yourself with practice areas outside of your initial focus. For example, regularly review the most popular blogs on substantive topics so that you are aware of devel-

opments and can speak knowledgeably about them at the appropriate time.

If you are consistently working on matters for a client or industry, set a Google alert for relevant keywords so that you will be notified each time a case or company is mentioned online. Depending on your relationship with the associate or partner with whom you are working, you might share that news or simply refer to it in discussions about assignments or related concerns.

### **Stay Organized**

Successful summers complete assignments in a timely fashion and follow up. In order to do so, you must remain organized. Consider using an electronic calendar and setting automatic alerts for professional and personal reminders. Also, listen for time-sensitive cues. For instance, if someone mentions an oral argument date or an important client meeting, add it to your calendar for follow-up purposes.

After receiving an assignment, write a short memo about the task before you proceed and share it with the assigning attorney to confirm your understanding, recommends Dalton. This will manage expectations and demonstrate your commitment to accuracy.

Take ownership of projects by treating them as if they are law school exams, suggests Angelo Stio, a partner in Pepper Hamilton's 35-lawyer Princeton office. "Even if a partner has not identified an issue, add it if you see it," he says.

Stio suggests that students maintain a list of each partner with whom they work along with a description of the assignment. After each assignment, add to that list and indicate whether you liked or disliked

that experience and work. It will provide an outline for discussion with the firm's recruiting coordinators during your periodic reviews, but also help you identify specific areas of interest and proficiency.

Follow up on the assignment and demonstrate an interest in staying involved. A week after submitting a memo or other work product, stop by the assignee's office or send an e-mail and ask whether he or she needs additional research. "I like when summers show the initiative and ask to watch the partner in court after helping to prepare the documents," comments Stio.

### **Merge Traditional and Social Networking**

Most summer associates are likely to have a Facebook account, but few will be using it for a professional purpose. Use the summer to evaluate your presence in the social networking environment and consider new tools to create or enhance your professional profile. Legal OnRamp and LinkedIn are good places to start.

Begin cultivating contacts and keep them updated on your summer progress. LinkedIn, for example, has a feature that allows you to communicate news to your entire network. That practice will become increasingly valuable as you return to school in the fall and long after you take the bar.

Bear in mind that networking is an internal and external effort. Summer associates should treat partners like clients. They should work with and learn about as many of them as possible, including small details about their families and work experience. Regardless of whether firms have scaled back their summer programs, there is still ample opportunity to engage in conversation. Those who are thoughtful

and interesting will be memorable.

It is also not too early to get involved in the legal community. Pro bono projects will offer many students the chance to connect with those in need of legal services. In addition, bar associations and young lawyers groups typically host networking events in June, July and early August. The traditional activities are still effective and one's willingness to engage in them will continue to be rewarded.

New York University Law School 2L, Darren Luft, echoes that point. "I don't think that anything has dramatically changed in that people still recognize when you work hard and perform well," says Luft, who is one of five summer associates in the Newark office of Patton Boggs LLP.

### **Avoid Standing Out for the Wrong Reasons**

While standing out is essential this year, make sure it is for a positive reason. Collins recommends that one should never take any fact or assertion for granted. Ask questions and understand the answers prior to beginning an assignment. He also suggests that summer associates understand their limitations and learn to decline an assignment. Despite the current environment in which most summers are fortunate to be employed, "you must be mature enough to let people know that you are overloaded," he says. Finally, partners are pleased when they see an appreciation for the business of being a lawyer.

Despite his observation of his fellow students that, "The overall attitude is definitely one of fear," Ross says "I am going with the flow." Perhaps that is the best way to balance the equation this summer. Take it from a math teacher. ■