

Summer lessons for fall associates — five steps for early success

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Law firm summer programs are now over, but lessons can still be gleaned from the experience that are invaluable for associates starting at law firms this fall. During our 2023 summer program, we had the privilege of working with over 25 summer associates across our offices.

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With this breadth of exposure, certain common qualities of excellent associates emerged. None of these qualities require any specific knowledge of the law but instead involve habits and mindsets that will set associates up for success. The steps below provide a guide for you, as a new associate, on how to highlight your ability to (1) think critically, (2) pay attention to detail, (3) achieve the end goal of each assignment, (4) communicate effectively and (5) remember that pressure doesn't always make perfect. Adapting these qualities can help you stand out in the early stages of your career before you have developed the legal expertise that comes with time and training.

Step #1 — Thou shalt ask questions!

Your experience as a law student may make you feel that asking questions will put you in the hot seat, or worse, initiate a rapid-fire Socratic showdown. However, in the actual practice of law, that will not be the case. Asking questions leads to learning and growing and shows that you are interested and inquisitive. It is not a sign of intelligence to not ask questions — in fact, completing tasks without inquiry might convey a lack of interest, analysis and critical thinking. Asking questions shows that you know there is more to learn.

As with any principle in the legal context, there is an exception. When asking questions, you should do your best to show that you have thought about the assignment and utilized available resources. Google is a great friend, and the law firm's document management system is a good source for examples and other precedent you can review. Also, try to approach the senior attorney with a mind of proposing solutions rather than simply asking

questions. For example, frame your question as, "I'm not sure about 'A', but because of 'B' I think we should do 'C'. Is that correct?"

Relatedly, don't assume anything. If you are given deal terms and don't know how something fits into the document, don't randomly include or omit the term. Simply ask the senior attorney about that provision, but, per the note above, do your research first and come with your suggested solution, if possible. Some rabbit holes are larger than others, and it's better to ask than attempt to find the bottom.

Finally, never submit assignments with questions embedded (unless they are items for the client or opposing counsel to confirm). You should be submitting your best work product, which means you should pose questions while working on the assignment and incorporate the feedback into your polished final draft.

Step #2 — Remember, it all matters

Every word matters. In the legal context, this includes the mailing address, the footers, and even the "boilerplate" language at the end of the document. Attention to detail when drafting isn't necessarily a skill taught in law school, but it is a way to shine as a junior associate. If a senior attorney provides a precedent document to use as your starting point, you still need to read and analyze it — do not just swap out terms.

Further, don't be afraid to comment on and improve the existing language in a document. Precedent documents are not infallible. Each drafting assignment is a chance to reassess. Don't be afraid to ask what the point of certain provisions are or highlight areas that aren't clear. Read through the entire document, think critically about it and recommend changes if needed.

Additionally, every assignment matters. Even if it is for another junior associate, seemingly trivial, or "not urgent." Treat each assignment as if the assigning attorney is responsible for your hiring decision, because the entire practice group is often solicited for performance feedback.

If you have time, try and revisit your final work product with fresh eyes, preferably after a good night's sleep. If you were given three days to draft a memo, there is no prize for submitting it on the first day. If you come back to it the next day, more often than not you will find a few items to update and correct that you may have missed, despite your careful reviews. Reading the same document

repeatedly without a break leads to diminishing returns, so come back to it after you've had a chance to clear your mind.

Step #3 – Begin with the end

Start each assignment with the end in mind. Know the deadline and the work product the attorney is expecting. If the senior attorney wants a chart, don't prepare a memo. If the final product is not clear, ask for further information or an example.

It can also be helpful to check in halfway through any assignment, even if you don't have any questions (although, per Step #1, you should). Confirm with the senior attorney that you are on the right path, thinking about the issues properly, and preparing the correct deliverable. Nothing is more frustrating for you and the senior attorney than when the senior attorney is expecting something different, and you go above and beyond to meet their perhaps poorly communicated instructions.

Submitting the assignment is not the end, however. If you think the assignment is finished once submitted, you will miss out on a valuable opportunity. Make sure you seek feedback and, hearkening back to Step #1, ask questions about the feedback. If you can't get any formal feedback, try looking at the differences between your work product and what is submitted to the partner or client and analyzing any changes that were made.

Step #4 – [Over] communicate

How you communicate with others can have just as big an impact as the quality of your work product. If you ask for a deadline or propose one, meet that obligation. If the assignment will take several days, let the senior attorney know once you have started.

If you have a week to submit something and don't communicate during that week with an update or questions, the senior attorney will start to worry that you are not progressing with the assignment, or even starting it. If the senior attorney sends any sort of follow-up or additional resources, make sure you respond quickly. When

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assigning attorneys do not receive any updates or responses during the course of the assignment, they will often complete the work product themselves at the 11th hour, only to have the associate turn in their assignment at the last minute.

Step #5 – Don't feel the pressure of perfection

Nobody is perfect, so please don't stress or lose sleep over a mistake you made or a particularly messy redline of your work product. View everything as a learning opportunity. Perfection is not expected, but professionalism, hard work, curiosity and analysis are.

Attention to detail when drafting isn't necessarily a skill taught in law school, but it is a way to shine as a junior associate.

In many instances, changes made to your document may not be correcting actual substantive mistakes but may be more stylistic or based on preference. You need to be asking questions, following instructions and thinking deeply about the assignment, and showing the same through the deliverable given to the senior attorney.

Conclusion

Now that law school is behind you, a new adventure awaits. As noted earlier, none of these steps require an associate to have taken any specific courses in law school, or to have any pre-existing legal knowledge, but instead focus on habits and mindsets that anyone can implement and that will set you up for success in your legal career. Always remember that it is the *practice* of law, not the *perfection*. Each assignment is a chance to, above all, learn more. So, seize this new opportunity with excitement and curiosity. As the future of the profession, know that every attorney is wishing you well.