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STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR A SUCCESSFUL SUMMER PROGRAM

By Susan G. Manch

Summer programs provide both student and law firm with a unique opportunity—the chance to determine whether or not the two are a match as employee and employer. The last few years have seen summer programs swell, with firms hiring heavily to keep up with the high demand for legal services. This year, summer salaries rose, law firms competed fiercely among themselves to recruit even larger summer classes, and high-achieving law students found themselves in the driver's seat when it came to choosing a summer firm. All these factors have contributed to firms feeling that they must have a great summer program in place. In my experience, the best summer programs are those that strategically attend to the motivational factors of these sought after "summers."

So what motivates them?

Firms everywhere are trying to figure out what they can do to make the summer associate experience a positive one. When asked, law students say the three P's can sum up the most critical evaluative factors they apply in assessing their summer experience:

- People
- Professional Development
- Practice

Of course, money plays a part in their decision-making process, but, believe it or not, they say it ranks below these three factors in importance as they assess the relative qualities of a potential employer. With top students having a wide range of choices among firms, it only makes sense that strategic planning for summer should begin with a consideration of how to address these key factors.

The people factor

Past surveys of summer associates report positive ratings for firms who provide high levels of attorney involvement in all aspects of the program. And not just through social functions. Firms who find creative ways to provide interaction between summers and firm attorneys give students the opportunity to assess the match from the best possible angle. Summer associates want to meet and work with the firm's attorneys of all levels of seniority. Many of the best summer programs start by providing each summer associate with an advisor or buddy for the duration of the program. Some firms also assign "readers" to each student to provide one-on-one assistance on each work assignment. Most firms use both partners and associates in these important shepherding roles.

At Sullivan & Cromwell in New York, each summer associate is assigned an associate "buddy" and a partner mentor. The associate buddy provides the student with a peer to go to with questions or concerns about day to day life in the firm. The partner mentor funnels assignments from other partners to the summer associate and helps guide their substantive experience. Kirkpatrick & Lockhart in Pittsburgh assigns a partner and two associate buddies to each summer. The role of the buddies is to make sure that the students are pleased with their assignments, that they are getting feedback on their work, and that all their questions are being answered.

Beyond pairing the associate with attorneys who will guide him or her through the summer experience, great summer programs provide a full range of opportunities for summer attorneys to interact with firm members. Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld in Washington, D.C. holds weekly lunches for summer associates where partners make presentations on their practices and areas of specialization. In Los Angeles, Latham & Watkins takes summer associates on a four-day retreat that provides them with a diverse menu of training programs and discussion groups facilitated by firm partners and associates.

As for social interaction, most firms do a great job on the fun part of summer. Cooking classes, boat cruises, theater or concert tickets, intimate dinners at partner's homes, picnics in scenic locations, surfing

lessons, bungee jumping, helicopter rides, sports events, and more invitations to eat than any summer associate could ever possibly accept are representative of the fun side of most firm's summers. Just remember that having a good mix of firm attorneys at each function provides summers with that vital personal connection they are seeking.

Proving a commitment to professional development

Law students today send a clear message that they want to work for firms that will help them develop the skills necessary for their success in that firm or elsewhere. This year's summer associates want to be certain that they will have the opportunity to develop a "portable toolbox" of legal skills at the earliest point possible in their careers. Successful summer programs communicate a developmental approach to attorney training that is in evidence in all of the firm's attorney management practices. It is critical to show students that professional development efforts do not end when summer attorneys go back to school, but rather are ongoing and tailored to the needs of each attorney. Many firms have found creative ways to communicate their developmental philosophy to students through a variety of approaches.

At Powell, Goldstein, Frazer & Murphy in Atlanta, summer associates are enrolled along with all firm attorneys in POGO University, the firm's monthly series of training seminars conducted by attorneys from all of the firm's practice areas. Covington & Burling in Washington, D.C. provides an intensive deposition and advocacy program for their summer associates taught by the firm's top litigators. Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner in D.C. offers students seminars throughout the summer on patent, copyright, and trademark law in addition to workshops on legal writing. Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld holds a six-week litigation clinic culminating in a mock trial. Teams of summers take a case from the initial client interview through to the trial presided over by partner "judges." Morrison & Foerster in San Francisco offers summer associates hands-on training through mock transactions as well as trials.

Recognizing that feedback plays a critical role in development, Wiley, Rein & Fielding in Washington, D.C. uses a mid-summer evaluation process during which partners provide developmental feedback to help summer associates set goals. Similarly, at Dow, Lohnes & Albertson in D.C., partner advisors make certain every summer associate receives developmental feedback upon completion of each assignment.

Practicing the practice

Some law students are very clear about their practice interests while others say they need to learn more before making a choice, but all agree that what they want from their summer experience is exposure to the actual work of associates. For many years, assignments in summer programs were predominately of the "make work" genre, rather than approximating real junior associate work. There was a feeling that junior associate work was too boring to expose summer associates to, and so stimulating summer assignments were manufactured to keep students interested. Of course, this practice sometimes led new lawyers to be disappointed upon coming to the firm and finding out what they would really be doing! Today, summer associates rate most highly those programs in which they get to see firm attorneys in action—going to court, hammering out a deal, negotiating a contract, or strategizing with team members. They enjoy *pro bono* assignments and express a preference for discrete projects that take no more than one to two weeks so that they can finish several different assignments during the summer. Since the work done by the summer associate is also the firm's best opportunity to assess his or her talents, thoughtful planning for this aspect of the program is essential.

Summer associates who accept offers at Sullivan & Cromwell receive a two-part questionnaire regarding their preferences for the upcoming summer experience. First, it asks them to designate from which practice area they would like their mentor to be assigned, and second, to choose practice areas in which they have an interest. This allows the firm to match both attorneys and assignments to students in a way that allows summer associates to have the broadest possible exposure to their areas of interest. Their summer associates do the same work as first or second-year associates. Gardner, Carton & Douglas in Chicago tells its summers they will get RJP, or a Realistic Job Preview. To achieve this, they employ what they call the "Shadow Program." Summer associates have the opportunity to *shadow* a partner in his or her day to day work, exposing them to the partner's normal mix of tasks on a given day.

Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering in Washington, D.C. oversees the development of assignments for its summer associates through SAWG, or the Summer Associate Working Group. Mirroring a program it successfully uses to monitor the development of new associates in the firm, SAWG monitors the quality and diversity of assignments available to each student. Wiley, Rein & Fielding uses its Summer Program Committee to guide partners in the development of appropriate assignments and to oversee the allotment of work among summers to ensure variety and fairness.

On to a great summer

As you embark on this year's summer experience, watch and listen to learn what your summer associates value most in their experience. At the end of each summer session, Sullivan & Cromwell conducts extensive exit interviews with each student to determine what went well and what might have been done differently. You can use this year's program to provide you with an important source of information from which to begin planning for next summer. Recognizing the motivational factors that influence summer associates' experiences and designing a summer program that addresses them results in a program that provides both student and firm with a positive experience.

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