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SUMMER ASSOCIATES *Outlook*

Six Tips for Maximizing Mentoring This Summer

Shaping the interaction and defining the scope of your relationship with your mentor

By Ari Kaplan

When summer associates arrive at Westfield, NJ-based Lindabury, McCormick, Estabrook & Cooper, P.C., they always receive a mentor. Many firms across the country take the same step to ensure a stronger connection between the law student and the firm, but also to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the practice of law. The key for you is to find ways to maximize and personalize that experience. "It is critical for the summer associate to be introduced to a mentor or contact person right away in order to make the associate feel more comfortable in what is likely to be an anxious, if not stressful, time," says Lindabury partner Greg Vitali.

Vitali knows; his legal career at Lindabury started with a mentor when he arrived during the summer of 1996 while

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attending Seton Hall University Law School in Newark. Like him, you too can transform the connection with your mentor into a career-shaping encounter that is often critical for success. Keep these ideas in mind over the next few months and throughout your professional travels.

Define Your Goals

Mentoring is often successful when the protégé knows what he or she wants to achieve before the relationship begins. Start with an understanding of what you hope to learn about the firm, the law and yourself. While these elements will not dictate your future, they will help you take full advantage of your experience, especially when a firm assigns a mentor to shepherd you through the process. The key is to be open to all possibilities. "Come with a mindset that anyone can be your mentor," says Ann Rainhart, Manager of Professional Development at Minneapolis, Minn.-based Faegre & Benson.

Find Connections

As soon as you know who your mentor will be, spend time learning about him or her. Find a common trait, experience or interest and demonstrate that you did the research. "It is not a bad idea to log onto the firm's website and review the résumé or bio of the mentor assigned in

order to get some background information that may help break the ice during the initial meeting," suggests Vitali. "You never know what connections or common interest you may share."

If the formal details are not revealing, conduct a Google search. And, if that does not work, just ask people at the firm. Receptionists and secretaries, particularly those who have been with the firm for a few years, are great sources of knowledge (and you will find, wisdom, on firm matters and personalities). He or she may know a lawyer's favorite sports team or musical group, whether that lawyer is family-oriented, and possibly his or her birthday. The nonlegal bond often defines mentoring relationships. The firm brings you together, but the foundation is built on personal interaction. You have the chance to shape that interaction and define its scope. Find ways to make it broad-based and positive.

Seek Guidance and Insight, Not Necessarily Assistance

As a summer, you are in an ideal position to get to know the partners and more senior associates at your firm. In fact, despite any anxiety you may feel to the contrary, they want you to ask questions and express a genuine interest in their work and experience. "Come to the table with the idea that this is someone from whom you can learn," says Rainhart.

“Come with questions, come engaged, come giving something of yourself,” she adds.

Rainhart’s point is critical because supervisors appreciate engagement. They welcome ideas about the summer program itself (it helps to be positive, but constructive suggestions for the future are often useful) and want to hear about your newfound enthusiasm for a particular area of law. They are also happy to share their perspective on a legal issue or even a career decision. There is a nurturing mindset over the summer at most organizations that is designed to foster mentoring success.

Find Meaningful Opportunities To Interact

With the increased focus on social events, you may find fewer opportunities to stand out professionally (though there is often someone that does so on the dance floor – don’t be that person). In fact, “it has become harder and harder for summer associates to come away with what they ought to be looking for, which is what it truly like to make a contribution to a real legal problem,” says Steve McCormick, a partner with Kirkland and Ellis in Chicago.

McCormick recommends taking the opportunity to work on multiple projects with your mentor or another potential co-mentor you may adopt after a few weeks. Find someone with an interesting case and try to remain committed to that project throughout the summer. “You can go to 13 countries in Europe in 3 weeks and not remembering any of them,” he says, supporting the notion that working for the most people on the greatest variety of cases does not always provide the best experience and insight into the firm’s culture. If you do so, “you are going to have all breadth and no depth,” he adds.

Regardless of how close a relationship you may develop with your mentor, however, there is rarely an excuse to let

your defenses down and tell all, notes Judith Finer Freedman, founder of The Balanced Worker Project, who counsels professionals in the U.S. and Canada. “The summer is a time for students to think about the professional they want to become by observing all that they can from the mentors around them,” she says. To that end, don’t be passive. Finer Freedman recommends shadowing your mentor to client meetings or in court, and independently taking the time to review important issues related to files in practice groups in which you may be interested. “Everyone has the talent or they would not have been hired, it is a question of whether they have the determination,” remarks McCormick.

Share Your Successes with Your Mentor

At most firms, mentors meet regularly with summer associates. At Lindabury, for example, they meet weekly on a formal basis, and more frequently on an informal basis, if possible. It is a time for mentors to provide feedback, but also to gauge the progress of his or her protégé to be in a position to provide insight during any mid-summer or summer-end review with the hiring committee. Since you may not be working directly with your mentor on every matter, share your success in areas in which he or she may be unaware. It could be something as simple as realizing the answer to a question or getting closer to deciding that you enjoy intellectual property over real estate work. The epiphanies will be as valuable as the victories.

Be Thoughtful and Grateful

After a few weeks of meeting, you are likely to learn the type of coffee your mentor drinks or what kinds of books he or she reads and even some favorite music. If he or she has a birthday that falls

in the summer, be thoughtful and remember it with a gift card or a small book. The point is never what you spend, but what you mean by the gesture. Genuine appreciation is a great way to organically raise your profile by being yourself.

Aside from gratitude, be creative with your thoughtfulness. Ask other associates about your mentor and other partners in the firm. Learn about their expectations and experiences from those who have worked with them in the past. Everyone has a personal preference. If you can anticipate that preference by calling someone in the office or asking an associate next door, it will make a strong statement about the type of lawyer you are sure to become.

After all, that is what the summer is about. You want to spend some of the time highlighting the person that you are and the rest of the time confirming for people the type of individual you have the potential to be. Vitali spent the summer of 1996 executing on this plan and his rise to partnership in 2006 was the result of that diligence.

Get started by learning to put yourself into a mentoring mindset, advises Rainhart. “Anyone with whom you interact in a law firm is someone who can take you to another place,” she says. You can gain insight from the firm librarian or receptionist as readily as you can from the attorneys.

Vitali suggests that summer associates keep a consistent and open dialogue going with his or her mentor. “Through the mentor process, the summer associate is given an opportunity to build a personal relationship with a partner in the firm who will most certainly have a voice, if not play a major role, in determining whether the summer associate will be offered a full-time job,” he notes. So enhancing your relationships at the firm will not only impact your summer, it could also change the course of your future. ■