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### Getting the Most from Your Summer Clerkship

by GAVIN R. VILLAREAL

Summer recruiting programs are underway at most big law firms. Here's how summer clerks can learn the most and maximize the odds of getting an employment offer when the summer ends.

- *Make the most of mentors.* Most firms assign an associate or a partner mentor to summer clerks. In general, mentors monitor the clerk's workload and make themselves available to answer questions. Whatever their formal responsibilities, mentors are working attorneys who know a lot about what it takes to succeed at the firm. Many went through the firm's summer clerkship program themselves.

But too few summer clerks take advantage of this resource. It pays to ask mentors tough questions: What is it like to work

at the firm? What does the firm expect of young associates? What training does the firm provide?

Summer clerks also should seek the mentor's input on assigned projects before diving into the work. A mentor can suggest helpful resources, review first drafts of all written work, and offer suggestions on format, analysis, and conclusions. Such input is particularly valuable if the mentor has worked with the assigning attorney and knows what she expects. There's no need for the summer clerk to fly solo.

Mentors also can help negotiate scheduling issues. For instance, a mentor may be able to intervene if the summer clerk is up against a hard deadline on one project and a senior partner unexpectedly asks for help on something else; this happens frequently in the real-



world practice of law. Even if the mentor can't resolve the conflict, talking it through might help the clerk figure out how to handle the situation. Failing to complete the work on time without communicating with the assigning lawyer is not an option.

- *Obsess over written work.* The ability to write well is one of the skills that law firms value

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most. A summer clerk's written work reflects much more than just an ability to assemble coherent sentences. It shows whether the summer clerk understood the assignment, anticipated and addressed issues that the assigning attorney may not have considered, and demonstrated research and analytical skills that are up to snuff. Because of the importance of written work product, each summer clerk should obsess over what he or she turns in.

Another tip: Clerks should write something for every assignment they receive because written work represents summer clerks long after the summer ends. The firm's employment committee likely will review written work product when making decisions about job offers. These documents must

prove that the clerk will be an asset to the firm.

- *Demand substantive feedback.* Getting a job offer is probably the ultimate goal of a summer clerkship. But receiving substantive feedback also should be near the top of every clerk's list of objectives.

Summer clerkships are most law students' first opportunity to work in a law firm. As a result, getting substantive feedback—something better than just “good job”—is the best way to learn. Don't be offended if the evaluating lawyer is less than glowing. The only way to improve is to know about, then work on, shortcomings.

Most assigning attorneys intend to give feedback, but it often falls victim to a heavy workload. Clerks should feel comfortable asking the assigning attorney for a candid critique. Even busy attorneys will make the time to do so when a clerk makes the effort to ask. Lawyers want to teach law clerks who want to learn.

- *Attend social events.* Out-of-office social events, such as lunches or dinners, are an important part of the summer experience. Work comes first, of course. But it's a mistake to hole up in the office and miss the chance to see how potential future colleagues interact in a social setting. If clerks do earn a job offer, these are the lawyers who, in the future, will teach them how to practice, evaluate their work and be their closest

colleagues. Even if summer clerks don't end up working for the firm, friendships and connections made at social events might benefit their careers down the road.

- *Talk to the staff.* Clerks shouldn't spend so much time trying to impress lawyers that they overlook another valuable source of inside information: the firm's staff. Messengers, secretaries and legal assistants all know exactly what is going on behind the scenes at a firm. They know how the attorneys get along with one another. They know how the folks they work for treat them—and new attorneys.

Keep in mind, however, that staff members also form opinions about the clerks. Failure to treat staff members with the respect and gratitude they deserve will come to the attention of the firm's employment committee. No one wants to work with a jerk.

Good luck this summer. Would-be lawyers who work hard, behave responsibly and follow this advice will get the most out of their clerkships.



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