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SUMMER ASSOCIATES *Outlook*

A Primer For Summer Associates

Firms need to realize a return on their investment in you

By Brian J. Ellis

Up until last year, the legal profession seemed recession proof. A lawyer being laid off was virtually unheard of. Law school seemed a sure bet for a well-paying job in an exciting profession. The jobs seemed plentiful and you felt secure with your decision to join the legal profession.

Then came 2008 and an economic downturn unlike any other since the Great Depression. Lawyers were losing their jobs. Offers to new associates were being rescinded. All of a sudden, the prospects for that great job have vanished and you realized that the legal profession is not immune from recession after all.

But here you are — in law school. You have several on-campus interviews scheduled. You desperately want a summer associate position. You want a chance to prove you have what it takes to succeed at a prestigious firm. But you realize that the always-careful hiring committees are being even more meticulous this year. So, you've worked extra hard — staying in to study while others spend the night partying. You've read and re-read the

Ellis is a member of the securities law practice area and an associate with Bressler, Amery & Ross in Florham Park. He is an alumnus of the firm's summer associate program.

cases that others merely skimmed. You're putting in the work, hoping that it will pay off.

Now, you're sitting in your school's career center — your interview is moments away. It seems absurd to believe that anyone could get to know anything about a person during a 20-minute on-campus interview. The point of the on-campus interview is to try not to give the person a reason to remove you from consideration. You were selected because of your grades, experience, background or some other intangible. The point is, you were selected. The firm is interested in you. Now, it is your job to fuel the firm's interest in you. Answer questions directly, candidly, and with confidence. Be proud, but not arrogant. Be impressive, but not oppressive. Be yourself, yes — but be the "self" that you will be comfortable being for your entire career. The same is true during your call-back interviews.

During your interviews, try to get a sense about whether the person sitting across the table from you is happy. During your call-back interview, notice the condition of the firm's offices. While you must understand that the legal profession comes with its share of stress, try to determine how the people you meet handle that stress. An excellent barometer can be found in the opinions of the newer associates — those that have

recently been where you are now. What do they have to say? What does their body language tell you?

In my experience, most of the firms at which I interviewed were known entities with recognizable names. Each of these firms had many positive attributes. However, with many of the people interviewing me, I had the sense that there was a certain disconnect between what they were saying and what I was observing. I felt uncomfortable at many of the firms. Although the salaries being offered somewhat quelled that discomfort, in the end, making the most money simply was not enough to convince me that I would be happy.

For me, one firm stood out. Like the other firms, this firm offered a very generous salary, was located in a beautiful area, had offices in multiple states, and had a variety of practice groups. But this firm was different. During that call-back, I felt almost immediately that I could exhale and be myself. The people were genuine. Their attitudes were enchanting. Throughout the entire callback interview, I felt relaxed. Somehow, that relaxation lead to excitement. I will always remember that, during my drive home that day, I thought this is where I want to live — this is where I want to work.

Receiving an offer for a summer associate position is really just the beginning of a summer-long interview. From the day you start, you will be judged. Opinions will be formed. Your work will be reviewed. The way you interact with others will be considered. Your personality will be assessed. The firm will make the most of its opportunity to determine

whether you are a good fit. You should make the most of your opportunity to do the same.

While the firm is carefully analyzing your ability to fit in and to produce quality work product, you should also carefully consider whether this firm is where you would like to begin your career. Make the most of the information available to you. Research the firm on NALP directory online. Check out the firm's Web site. Read about the attorneys at the firm. Even before you decide to interview with a firm, you should make every effort to determine whether this firm is the right firm for you. Do not let current economic conditions or the state of the job market for legal professionals convince you to take whatever you can get. After all, you came to law school seeking a fulfilling, rewarding career. Your happiness with your firm, co-workers and area of practice are essential to obtaining that fulfillment.

When I accepted my position, I felt that I made the right choice. I turned down offers from firms offering more money. I turned down offers from firms with household names. I chose a firm with a summer associate experience that is virtually identical to the experience of a first-year associate. We had our law firm events, our dinner parties, and our wine, but we also had a realistic work experience. I would advise those seeking summer associate positions to speak with former summer associates to try to ascertain how their experience as a summer associate compared with their experience as a first-year associate. Were they overwhelmed during their first year as an associate? Did they

feel adequately prepared for the real work of a lawyer? I heeded this advice, and thus far, it has served me well.

While you are a summer associate, always remember that you are now a professional. Act like a professional. You will have difficult days. You will be given assignments that you just do not understand. You will be given assignments that are tedious. There will be a couple of people with whom you just do not get along. It will be a gorgeous day, and you will be in the library. When you do go out with the other attorneys, there will be alcohol. You will dine at fancy restaurants. You will make a healthy salary. But you must always be professional. You must not get discouraged. You should do your best to tolerate others. You must always remember that there is work that needs to be done — even on nice days. Do not drink too much. Have good table manners. Do not spend your entire paycheck before you even open the envelope. Remember, you will be observed. The firm wants to know that it can put you in front of a client with confidence that you will not embarrass yourself or the firm.

Chances are, you will not be the only summer associate at the firm. Further, chances are that not every summer associate at the firm will ultimately get an offer at the end of the summer. Thus, there will be competition and a little uneasiness. Just keep your head down. Be pleasant and do good work. Get to know everyone. Show up to firm events. Be personable. If you are pleasant, do good work, and people know who you are, you will likely get an offer. If for some reason you do

not get an offer, at the very least you will receive several glowing recommendations to help you with your future job search.

When I was beginning my summer associate position, those that had come before me told me that the firm wants to give you an offer, unless you give the firm some reason not to. Essentially, the advice was: "everyone gets an offer unless they do something wrong." I doubted the truth of this advice at the time, and I especially doubt it today.

With the current state of the economy, and especially with the current state of the job market for legal professionals, I would suggest that future summer associates reflect on the following: "nobody gets an offer unless they earn it." Firms, like any other business, are feeling significant economic pressure. From scaling back marketing, to eliminating library resources, to downsizing support staff, firms are doing whatever is necessary to cut costs.

I would not allow myself the false comfort of believing that an entire class of summer associates will end up with offers. Firms are seeking a return on the investments that they make in summer associates. If the firm feels that it will realize a return, a summer associate will receive an offer. I believe that, in the current market, firms will need to be persuaded all the more that they will indeed realize a return on their investment in you as a summer associate.

Now that you've accepted the firm's offer, it is up to you to persuade the firm that it made the right decision to invest in you. ■