How To Get That Permanent Offer: Making the Most of Your Internship, Externship or Summer

CONGRATULATIONS! You’ve just accepted an offer for an internship, externship or summer associate program, and now you’re ready to show your employer that you deserve a permanent place with them after graduation – or if they do not make such offers, that they should at least give you a glowing reference.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that your program is an extended two-way interview. Your employer will be watching you closely to determine whether you have what it takes to become a successful and productive attorney, and your job is to determine whether you would like to begin your legal career with this employer on a permanent basis after graduation. How do you make the most of your experience?

Because you will receive so much advice on what you SHOULD do to succeed, sometimes it’s easiest to keep in mind what you should NOT do, so let’s begin with a short and sweet list of the “DON’T”s:

### TOP TEN INTERN/EXTERN/SUMMER ASSOCIATE MISTAKES*

1. Being inflexible
2. Confusing priorities
3. Socializing excessively
4. Missing deadlines
5. Abusing support staff
6. Trivializing associates
7. Being inconsiderate
8. Being competitive with other summer associates
9. Disappearing
10. Procrastinating

Now that we have the “DON’T”s out of the way, let’s spend some time on the “DO”s: A good way to think about starting your internship, externship or summer experience off on the right foot is to always remember three “R”s – RESPECT FOR YOURSELF, RESPECT FOR OTHERS, AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR ACTIONS. What exactly does this mean in the context of your internship, externship or summer position?

Let’s break it down one by one:

1) **RESPECT FOR YOURSELF**

   a) Ask for feedback. Be persistent. You deserve to know how you are doing.
   b) Find a mentor, someone with whom you feel comfortable and who you feel you can trust.
   c) Be positive and enthusiastic! Have a great attitude! Be confident! Try not to downplay your worth with unnecessary apologies or qualifying statements such as “I could be wrong, but ….”
d) Communicate your needs. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Know your limits. Learn to ask for more time on an assignment when you need it. Accept and decline work gracefully, focus on your desire to do a great job on a few assignments rather than a mediocre job on many assignments.

e) Keep track of your time accurately and promptly. Never sell yourself short.

f) Evaluate whether it feels like the right “fit” and if you will want (or not want) to return.

g) Be yourself! You owe it to yourself to be honest about who you are. Being an attorney is tough enough as it is – there is no need to add to that the stress of pretending to be someone you are not (or pretending to know more than you do – this will come back to haunt you sooner or later!)

h) Have fun! Take advantage of training seminars and other opportunities to broaden your horizon.

2) RESPECT FOR OTHERS

a) Return phone calls and e-mail promptly – not just with partners and clients, but with everyone. Remember, the relationships you create now will carry into your legal career after graduation. Studies have shown that clients expect responses within the same day, preferably within 4 hours.

b) Let your secretary know where you are at all times, and let him/her know how you can be reached in case of an emergency (either by e-mail if you have a wireless handheld device or by cellphone).

c) Get to know people. Institute an open door policy (both literally and figuratively).

d) Be a team player. Share resources. Don’t be too competitive. Take a cue from reality TV and resist the urge to form “alliances”. Concentrate on producing excellent work product instead.

e) Refrain from office gossip – no matter how juicy the details. And if you find yourself in the middle of a budding office romance (it’s more common than you think), be discrete.

f) Treat everyone with respect – not just partners. Staff members are the backbone, and without them many offices would cease to operate smoothly. Be courteous and professional. Always say thank-you – this includes the person who empties your wastebasket at the end of every day.

3) RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR ACTIONS

a) Listen to all voice-mails and read all announcements you receive by e-mail or hard copy so you don’t miss any important information (if you miss something, you only have yourself to blame)

b) Record your billable hours accurately and promptly (try to keep track of your time on a daily basis). Many firms now use software such as Carpe Diem which makes this extremely simple.

c) Be proactive! Take initiative and ask questions. Always have a pad of paper and a pen with you. Be sure you understand your assignment and deadlines. Communicate clearly and regularly with your assigning attorney, giving her or him updates on your progress. Brush up on your legal research and writing skills before the summer starts and get to know the library staff early on.

d) Be organized. Learn to multi-task and prioritize (when in doubt, ask your mentor or your assigning attorneys). Effective management leads to success, missing deadlines does not.

e) Pay attention to details, and proofread, proofread, proofread! There’s no such thing as a draft!

f) Be aware of and follow office procedures, including the employer’s dress code (a good rule of thumb is to always have a suit handy just in case you need to run to court or to a client meeting) and reimbursement policies (it is not appropriate to charge a client or the firm for that $100 cab ride because you had too much to drink the night before – use your discretion and common sense).

One final thought: Always remember that Law Career Services is here to help and answer any and all questions you may have, so if you have a question you don’t feel comfortable asking anyone at your employer, just pick up the phone and dial (408) 554-4350 – GOOD LUCK!

* Adapted from advice provided by Carol Sprague, Director of Legal Hiring, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom in the Miami Daily Business Review, June 2, 2000.