

Ask A Mentor: What Makes A Successful Summer Associate?

By **Julie Crisp** (June 2, 2021)

Experts answer questions on career and workplace conundrums in this Law360 Pulse guest column series. Have a question you're afraid to ask your law firm chair, practice area leader or mentor? Submit it anonymously here.

In this installment, Julie Crisp, vice chair of the recruiting committee at Latham & Watkins LLP, outlines how summer associates can navigate a few densely packed weeks at a law firm and set themselves up for success.

Q: What are some ways summer associates can make a mark at their firms and take the first important steps toward being successful lawyers?

—2021 summer associate

With summer nearly in full swing, law school students nationwide are settling into their (mostly virtual) summer associate positions: tackling first assignments, networking and probably feeling a great deal of pressure to excel.

I know firsthand how exciting — and also how stressful — this experience can be. I started my summer associate position at Latham a little over a decade ago, and I still remember some of my own fears and concerns. Now, I meet regularly with summer associates to help them navigate these densely packed few weeks at the firm.



Julie Crisp

Summer associates often worry that they will make a mistake or ask the wrong question, but questions are a key part of communication, especially early in your career.

During my summer at Latham, I once spent part of an afternoon trying to figure out how to respond to an email I had received from a partner that was addressed to "Julian" instead of "Julie." I remember wondering: Is it really intended for me? How should I respond?

I even asked another summer associate for advice. I should have simply replied, and made sure to sign my email response with my actual name, but I was too nervous. Now I know better.

Ask questions.

If you are like many summer associates, your experience with legal work prior to this position has been minimal, and that is OK. More senior lawyers will not expect you to know the ins and outs of the job when you start; they understand this is a learning experience. Ask for details. Determine the scope of the work: What is the project? What is your role in it? Are you on the right track?

Anticipate what comes next. Ask for a deadline when you receive an assignment, and keep track of timing expectations for your other projects.

If a scheduling conflict arises and you cannot meet the deadline, tell your supervisor right away and ask for direction on how you should prioritize your assignments. When a partner emails you with a task — and we send a lot of emails — respond to acknowledge the request and use the opportunity to ask for any clarifications.

Ask questions early on instead of going down the wrong path — partners and associates will appreciate it.

Network proactively.

Relationship building is the cornerstone of the summer associate experience, and I cannot stress enough how important it is to develop a network of contacts. Spend time talking with attorneys and learning about their practice areas.

I used to advise summer associates that when they see someone they have not met in the lunchroom or the hallway, they should introduce themselves. The process is slightly different in our current virtual environment — Zoom connects us face-to-face across borders and time zones — but the main idea is the same.

Be proactive. Attorneys are busy, but they want to engage with you and will gladly spend half an hour or so talking to you about their practice and law firm life generally.

When I came to Latham, I thought I would only work in BigLaw for a couple of years, but I ended up staying — partly for the work, but mostly for the people. During my summer associate experience I thoroughly enjoyed the events and dinners, found great mentors and made friends with the people in my summer class.

In addition to attorneys, remember to build relationships with your peers — they will be with you throughout your career and may even be a future client.

In conclusion, reach out to a partner or associate and suggest a cup of coffee via Zoom.

Explore practice areas.

I had absolutely no idea what type of law I wanted to practice when I was in law school, but I thought I would figure it out by the end of my summer program.

I tried out a few different practice areas — land use, corporate and litigation — but by the end of the program I still did not know which direction to take. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to come back to the firm and try everything once more before choosing my current practice area: employee benefits and executive compensation.

If you are curious about a specific area, find an attorney who specializes in it and reach out by email. You could say something like, "I'm really interested in land use. Could we have coffee and talk a bit about your practice area?"

You may find you enjoy some projects and practice areas more than others, but remember: Everything you do is being evaluated, so deliver consistent quality in your work.

Ask attorneys about and, if you have the opportunity, try projects in their practice areas. People enjoy sharing their stories.

Take care of yourself.

Networking opportunities for this year's summer associate program at my firm look a little different from our usual lineup of dinners, happy hours and industry events.

We know meeting each other in Zoom breakout rooms is not always a satisfying substitute for connecting in person, but we want to engage and inspire our summer associates, even from afar. This summer, we've planned cooking and painting classes, trivia nights, dance parties and even a virtual scavenger hunt.

Your firm's social calendar is probably packed with virtual networking opportunities as well, and you may feel obligated to attend them all. But remember that Zoom fatigue catches up to you quickly, and so does burnout.

Feel free to skip the occasional networking event, especially once you have started building relationships toward the end of the summer. After a full day in front of your screen, it is OK to take a break.

A practical tip: Turning off the self-view function during Zoom meetings eases the stress of staring at yourself in a virtual meeting.

In conclusion, working as a summer associate might be nerve-racking at first, but if you are prepared to learn and seize opportunities that come your way, you will set yourself up for success.

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