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School Is in Session for Summer Associates

Joyce Manna Janto
University of Richmond, jjanto@richmond.edu

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School is in session for summer associates

By Joyce Manna Janto

Law students who are starting summer associate positions often need a "reality check." Whether these aspiring lawyers are moving from the casual summer employment of their college days, or switching professional fields, they will have to understand and adapt to the culture of a law firm.

New summer associates need to understand the mores of their own firm and the locale's legal culture, and master practical matters such as the firm's billing system. Legal research that is "more or less accurate" is not accurate enough, and may be too costly, for a law firm's clients.

Law firm librarians who are on the front line in breaking in the summer associates sometimes challenge their counterparts in law school: "Don't you teach them anything in law school?" Academic librarians respond, "Our research classes are either low- or no-credit. We can't make them pay attention." Students overwhelmed with substantive courses are apt to take our lessons less seriously.

So law library faculty at the University of Richmond have learned to reach out to students when they're most ready to listen -- just before they head off for summer legal employment.

First offered in 2000, a librarian-designed program called "Bridge the Gap Between Law School and Employment" schools ambitious students in the summer associate's work life.

Aside from sessions on legal research, the program focuses on other aspects of working as a lawyer: professionalism, working with a senior associate or partner, and how to conduct and bill legal research in a firm setting.

One of the strengths of our program is that we invite members of the legal community to speak to our students. We focus not just on the research skills and job knowledge required to be a successful associate, but on the intangible factors that may be just as important in landing a permanent professional position.

In this year's program, offered last month, legal recruiters got down to basics:

- Dress the part. Don't take your cues from TV lawyers, really look at the lawyers at your firm. Get to know a tailor.
- Observe local practices. Does everyone keep their door open? Do people communicate through casual hallway encounters, or make appointments with each other?
- Mind your office manners. Be on time for meetings, be a team player, keep your supervising attorney updated on your assignments.
- Don't turn down lunch invitations. Being a gringo who always works through lunch may not be what your supervisors want.
- Know the value of law firm social functions. You're not just there to unwind, partners are scrutinizing how your summer associates behave in a social setting.
- Finally, it bears repeating: Never turn down lunch invitations.

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