

5-14-2007

## School Is in Session for Summer Associates

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### Recommended Citation

Joyce Manna Janto, *School is in Session for Summer Associates*, Va. Lawyers Weekly, May 16, 2007 at 5.

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## GUEST COLUMN

# 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:



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- 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 grind 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 their summer associates behave in a social setting.

- Finally, it bears repeating: Never put in an e-mail something that you would be uncomfortable reading on the front page of a newspaper.

Richmond lawyer Brent Timberlake, a 2004 graduate of the University of Richmond law school, invoked the Boy Scout motto. Summer associates should always have a pen and notebook with them, he said, because you never know when a partner will stop you in the hall with a request for assistance.

When a senior lawyer makes an assignment, the associate should ask questions to make sure the issues are clear, Timberlake suggested. Ask how the finished product should be delivered, whether by memo, letter or brief. If invit-

ed to a firm meeting, the summer associate should do the homework ahead of time, and learn who will be there and what the intended outcome is.

If you make a mistake, own up to it and correct it as quickly as possible, Timberlake said. And good things come to those who show initiative, he said, recalling how during his summer associate days, his interest in arbitration led to an invitation to an out-of-state arbitration.

Summer associates have to know how to do legal research, and the pros were at the University of Richmond to tell them how to charge for it. Law students accustomed to free rein with their proprietary passwords on university computers may be in for a shock. There is a wide variety in how firms bill for legal research, according to Lexis representative Shelley Landfair and Westlaw representatives Denise Stewart and Kelly Perkins.

Some law firms may have two tiers of service – a flat-rate contract for Virginia law databases, and a transactional contract covering the rest of the Lexis/Westlaw universe. The publisher reps stressed the importance of pre-

search preparation. Basic research in treatises and statutes can help refine the issues, and a firm librarian may help verify that the appropriate databases are selected. It helps to write out the search before signing onto an electronic service. Firm training offered to summer associates assumes familiarity with online searching, and will focus on advance searching tips and cost-effectiveness.

With the students primed to think of time as money, John Barden, Head of Reference at the law school's William Taylor Muse Law Library, helped them refocus on the basic materials that provide the framework for their research efforts. Barden reviewed the three main sources of law: statutes, cases and administrative regulations, and suggested how to begin research in each area, in both print and electronic sources.

Legal research should start, Barden said, with understanding the assignment. Listen, take notes, clarify, determine what level investigation is desired, and the format of reply, and finally, repeat the assignment back to the attorney to make sure you both are on the same wavelength.

Through the law school's Career Services Office, law library staff stay in touch with firms that hire their students. Many of those firms have required their summer hires to attend the law school's Bridge the Gap program. One of the best tributes to the law librarians' efforts has come from a student who balked at being "forced" to attend.

Within an hour of the program conclusion, he had e-mailed the library staff: "Thanks for making me do this."

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