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**Relationship Building Is Crucial:
Professional relationships can be the key to a successful summer
as well as to launching a career.**

By Diane Costigan/Special to *The National Law Journal*

Today's law students are incredibly savvy. They live in a competitive world and are keenly aware of the opportunities awaiting them. Now more than ever, graduating law students rely on law firm positions to obtain the solid legal training and experience that will inevitably lead to future possibilities – including, but not limited to, partnership.

Given that many new lawyers will opt for shorter tenures at firms, law students know they need to maximize their training from day one. These efforts can and should start as early as their summer placement. Most large law firms plan comprehensive summer programs that provide access to both legal skills training and practical experience in a variety of substantive areas. Of course, summer associates should avail themselves of every opportunity to acquire and develop skills in the course of completing real assignments.

If the key to the future is training, the most meaningful exposure to that training will come through building relationships with experienced lawyers. Every other aspect of a great summer program will be peripheral to this strategy.

For this reason, the most significant component of a summer program is the opportunity to learn directly from practicing attorneys. The ability to work with seasoned lawyers provides summer associates with exposure to those who once stood in relatively junior shoes, and who have spent years acquiring skills they are now in a position to share. For the most part, attorneys are eager to pass on what they have learned through experience. There is, however, an art to ensuring they do so. It is called relationship building.

Professional relationships built during a law student's summer experience are important for several reasons. First and foremost, successful relationships open doors to the kinds of new information, experience and insights that can both further career goals and make the practice of law exciting. For example, through such relationships summer associates can discover which partners do the work in which they are most interested. They can also determine who is successful and why, who has the most important clients and who they want to target for work assignments.

This kind of information is available through law firm buzz and easily obtained through a few knowledgeable contacts, but there is nothing like learning it firsthand. In addition, through these relationships summer associates can gain access to legal training in the form of actual

work assignments or enrichment activities such as conference calls, court appearances, depositions, closings and/or client exposure.

Second, these relationships offer an excellent opportunity to hone communications and interpersonal skills and learn how to conduct oneself in the legal profession. As second-year law students, summer associates do not enter law firms with a plethora of legal skills. They do arrive, however, with a modest arsenal of “soft skills.” As important as the acquisition of legal skills is during the course of a career, attorneys need a strong complement of communication and interpersonal skills to be successful. Each relationship cultivated during the course of a summer provides a chance to refine these tools for success.

It’s all about the people

Work-life balance is important to many attorneys, but recent literature about the generation coming out of law school suggests that this is an absolute priority for them. Relationships can help jump-start a healthy work-life balance strategy by creating friendships at the office that will bring some enjoyment and release to otherwise significant time demands. At a certain level, most law firms offer the same things: quality work, sophisticated clients, training and development programs, etc. What sets the top firms apart is the quality of the people they employ.

Law students should be encouraged to make this a significant consideration in their ultimate decision. This analysis, however, cannot be taken under advisement if significant time has not been expended on cultivating relationships. While it is always good to develop relationships for the purpose of advancing one’s career, it is also beneficial to have colleagues who will enhance one’s life from a personal perspective.

Finally, professional relationships can be extremely useful throughout a lawyer’s career. There will be times when guidance, advice, support and maybe even a sympathetic ear or an inspirational pep talk will be critical. Whether looking at short- or long-term goals, a summer associate will find it helpful to know and trust as many mentors, allies and supporters as possible. In establishing a network of personal contacts who are professionals, a lawyer is also building a repository of positive publicity and persuasive testimonials that can be crucial to any future career strategy. Time and energy invested into the development of constructive relationships is almost never wasted.

Some of the most pivotal relationships cultivated during the course of a summer will be with mentors. Most law firms assign formal mentors to their summer associates. The main benefits of such programs are twofold. First, they ensure that at least one or two people are specifically charged with helping law students navigate uncharted waters. Second, they help formalize the firm’s expectations with respect to roles and responsibilities assumed by mentors. Formal mentor relationships should be approached with modest expectations, however, as those assigned may not take their roles as seriously as the firm would like.

Thankfully, even the most unmotivated of formally assigned mentors can be encouraged with the right strategic approach. Summer associates need to inspire formal mentors to engage in the relationship by seeking them out instead of expecting to be paid visits, inviting them out to lunch or coffee and asking them to review written work product. In addition, summer associates

should consult formal mentors when issues or concerns arise, and involve them before, after or during mid-summer or end-of-summer reviews.

Overtures like these serve as subtle reminders to formal mentors of their obligations and responsibilities. By taking ownership and initiating the relationship themselves – even if this may initially seem counterintuitive – summer associates can encourage formal mentors to invest in their careers.

Informal mentors

If the formal mentoring process is a disappointment, informal mentors can step in to fill the gap. At the end of the day, a mentor is anyone who is willing to take an interest in, and dedicate time to, a summer associate's professional development. In fact, informal mentoring relationships often have a better success rate and a greater impact, perhaps because they evolve more naturally over time. The fact that they seem to occur outside the administrative process can be liberating; at the very least, they seem to have sincerity that is not always evident in more formal pairings. As with formal mentoring though, the success of informal mentoring will increase proportionally with the level of effort exerted by the summer associate.

Informal mentoring relationships arise under many different circumstances, most often through actual work assignments. Simply by producing quality work, asking good questions, taking an active interest, showing the desire to learn and providing thoughtful customer service, summer associates can lay the groundwork for a fruitful informal mentoring experience.

These relationships should not be limited to partners. Associates can be some of the best informal mentors. They are often more approachable and can help create safe pathways to relationships with partners and other more senior attorneys. Also, today's midlevel and senior associates are tomorrow's partners or general counsels, all of whom can be instrumental in future endeavors.

Other types of informal mentoring can occur through networking with school alumni, attorneys from the same geographic area or attorneys with whom summer associates may share similar interests or hobbies – all places where there is already a level of common ground. The possibilities are endless, and summer associates should pursue any informal mentoring opportunities that are within their reach. For example, they should seek out the attorneys with whom they interviewed – particularly anyone with whom they already feel a strong connection.

Benefits of alliances

Mentors, allies and supporters offer summer associates infinite benefits. They help decode legalese and partner-speak. They offer and help make sense of feedback. They facilitate finding fulfilling work. They assist with navigating law firm politics. They make introductions and promote summer associates to others. They point out helpful shortcuts. They provide enrichment activities like court appearances, depositions and client meetings. They give insight into what the competition (*i.e.*, other summers and more junior associates) is doing. They pass on important information – such as the fact that the front desk operator on the night shift is partial to jelly doughnuts. They advise the summer associate not to have that fourth martini at the midsummer cocktail reception. They counsel on how to ask for the day off to attend (or perhaps not attend) a second cousin's second wedding. They give insider information on what

floors to sit on and which secretaries not to get stuck with. In short, they provide invaluable guidance that can be pivotal to a summer experience and set a successful career in motion. Summer associates need to surround themselves with as many such individuals as possible.

Furthermore, such relationships should not be limited to attorneys. In many cases, secretaries, administrative assistants, paralegals and librarians will be an important lifeline. They have institutional and administrative knowledge and can provide daily support and guidance.

In addition, given the junior status summer associates have on most projects, they will likely become well acquainted with the mail, reproduction and word-processing departments while running document changes and organizing the delivery of documents to clients and others. These departments are essential to any client service strategy a summer associate puts in place. Time invested to ensure positive relationships here will pay dividends.

Take a genuine interest

Cultivating relationships is not a science but a creative endeavor. In addition to establishing a professional rapport in the course of work relationships, casual and informal conversations (as long as they are contextually appropriate) can go a long way toward putting people at ease. It helps to pay attention to what people say and to remember details like names of children, spouses/partners and pets; beloved sports teams or hobbies; and favorite vacation spots, etc. People like to talk about themselves. If they feel comfortable enough, they will be more inclined to share professional insights and observations.

Relationships, once cultivated, need to be sustained

Most important, relationships, once cultivated, need to be sustained. Summer associates should make sure to stay connected with mentors (both formal and informal), supporters and allies once they are back at school. An excellent way to do so is by volunteering to help out with recruiting activities. If the firm will be on campus, for example, they can stop by and offer to talk to students. In addition, they should accept invitations to firm events such as holiday parties or other receptions. Finally, they can ask for academic guidance throughout the school year or even recommendations for post-bar exam vacation destinations. Any opportunities law students have to continue relationships developed during their summer experience, even through an occasional e-mail, will contribute to their professional development and, on a practical level, a smooth integration into law firm life. After that, the possibilities are endless.