

6 Essential Skills For Summer Associates To Land An Offer

By **James Argionis** (September 27, 2024)

This article provides six recommendations for law firm summer associates on how to become effective communicators, impress their supervising attorneys and garner the respect needed to receive an offer from the firm.

Receiving an offer to become a BigLaw summer associate has become increasingly more difficult. With summer associate offer rates at the lowest point since 2012, you must do all you can to distinguish yourself from your colleagues, and you have only a couple of months to do so.



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The pressure to prove yourself as a valued, trusted and effective potential full-time part of the firm can sometimes be overwhelming. Like new associates, summer associates need to be great at researching, writing, critical thinking and problem-solving in general — all while finding ways to efficiently manage and prioritize their time to meet the high-pressure demands inherent in every busy law practice.

A large part of being a successful summer associate has to do with becoming an effective communicator. It is extremely rare for a BigLaw summer associate to have direct client contact. In fact, even for the first few years after becoming a new associate at a firm, most new associate work-related communications end up being internal to a more senior attorney, often a partner.

Using your time as a summer associate to impress those you work for with your communication skills will increase your chances of receiving an offer to join the firm after your graduation.

1. Be timely — avoid delay at all costs.

Time management is crucial for summer associates. A law practice is chock-full of deadlines, meetings and other types of appointments, and during a summer associate program, those deadlines may be even more compressed. One of the most common mistakes made by summer associates is missing deadlines or otherwise not timely communicating the results of their assignments.

There may often be a cascading effect to your missed deadline that will likely affect the client, and consequently, the client's relationship with your law firm. Therefore, you must manage your time and prioritize tasks to absolutely ensure that you will always complete assignments by the date you promised.

You will reap many rewards if you develop a reputation for always being timely — or, better yet, ahead of schedule — in your assignments. One of the most common compliments partners provide in summer associate and even associate evaluations is that the associate always meets deadlines.

Your reputation for punctuality will garner you respect and make you more in demand with the partners and other senior lawyers at your firm. So, do your best to plan, prioritize and never miss a deadline. But if something unexpected gets in your way, follow the next

communication recommendation below.

2. Be transparent, and do not misrepresent.

Given summer associate programs' short duration, you should go into the program having pushed off any time-consuming personal matters. Be ready to work, and to work a lot if required of you. However, we are all human, and sometimes we make mistakes or things just simply do not go as planned. When such things occur, you must be honest and open in your explanations.

The easiest way to lose the trust and respect of your superiors, and possibly lose the opportunity to obtain an offer of employment post-law school graduation, is to fabricate excuses or to attempt to hide things from them.

It would seem obvious not to hide or misrepresent facts to those for whom you work. In fact, the rules of professional conduct require lawyers to be truthful in statements to others, so, as a summer associate, you should hold yourself to those important standards.

However, all too often, a lack of transparency or, worse yet, outright misrepresentations result from summer associates trying to navigate a busy, compressed summer work schedule full of multiple and usually overlapping deadlines.

If you want to get that offer to join the firm, do not go down that dishonest path. Keep those that need to know informed about your progress, and be truthful in your communications.

Transparency and honesty build trust, and your supervisors and coworkers want to work with those on whom they can rely. Keeping an open and honest line of communication about assignment progress and about any impediments you encounter will foster better collaboration and effective teamwork.

As any senior associate or partner will tell you, when it comes to communications from summer associates, honesty truly is the best policy.

3. Ask questions for clarification.

Clear communication is extremely important for accurately completing assignments.

In a law firm setting, the assignments to summer associates, just like to new associates, are commonly a mix of complex legal and factual issues. Understanding exactly what is being asked of you is essential to providing quality work. If there is something about an assignment that is not clear to you, do not hesitate to ask questions to clarify the assigned task.

Too many summer associates shy away from asking clarifying questions and, as a result, end up wasting valuable time and resources heading off on a tangent. Make sure you ask questions and get on the same page from the beginning so that your research can be appropriately focused to hone in on the exact issue in question. Spending time, especially billable time, heading in the wrong direction must be avoided.

Of course, be smart about how you ask your questions, being respectful of others' time by consolidating your questions as much as possible to avoid multiple, potentially bothersome and disruptive discussion sessions.

To become a trusted and sought-after source of information, you must ensure that your work product is accurate and clearly on point. Reach out, communicate about the assignment, and be clear on what is being asked of you.

4. Be a critical thinker and problem-solver.

Some legal assignments have a clear answer that either supports or opposes the position for which your law firm was hired. In those situations, you should communicate the answer and provide a detailed, well-articulated answer to the problem at hand, also making sure you include all proper citations to the support your research uncovered.

In many other situations, however, assignments will consist of legal issues that are challenging or seemingly almost impossible to solve.

Most legal disputes occur because there is no clear answer to the dispute, and outside-the-box thinking becomes necessary. Under those circumstances, the worst thing you could communicate to your partner is that you could not find anything on point.

When dealing with unusual, gray-area or novel issues, legal research requires tenacity and creative thinking. Be thorough in your research, and explore all angles. Look beyond your jurisdiction if necessary, and scour all types of secondary sources to find a potential solution.

Finding a definitive answer is often like finding the proverbial needle in a haystack. However, a critical thinker and creative problem-solver will drive to find a workable solution rather than simply give up.

More importantly, when there is no true answer, be a critical thinker and a creative problem-solver instead of simply giving up.

Some of the biggest disappointments partners encounter when working with summer and even new associates is when those associates spend billable time researching, and then communicate that they could not find any answer. On the other hand, partners are genuinely pleased and impressed when they are presented with a well-thought-out and well-supported potential solution to the problem posed, even if that solution might be a stretch.

When you critically and creatively research and problem-solve, you demonstrate your value as a resource. As a result, others will value your opinion and will seek you out for many more projects, and hopefully recommend that you be hired post-graduation.

5. Be meticulous.

After you have found a definitive answer or crafted some creative well-supported potential solution, you will of course need to convey the results of your work to your supervising attorney.

Sometimes you will be instructed to go talk to your supervisor in person; other times you might be asked to just put it in an email, or to draft a memo. Regardless of how formal or informal, or whether orally or in writing, your work product must be meticulous.

For written work product, informal language, typos or other mistakes are distracting and

annoying, and may create the impression that you are careless or unmotivated to do your best. Proofread, double-check your citations, and then do both again before you turn in your finished product.

You want to put your best foot forward anytime you attach your name to a piece of writing — as a summer associate and also long-term in your career.

The expectation for law students, especially a member of any law review or law journal, is that your citations, grammar and editing skills should be at the top of your game. Live up to and even strive to surpass that expectation.

As to any oral communications, you must not only be accurate, but also articulate. Be prepared to give a concise yet comprehensive explanation, and be ready to expand on topics if asked.

To be fully prepared, outline your thoughts and have citations and even printed copies of your sources at the ready in case you are asked for them.

Being meticulous in your written and oral presentations will make you a valuable member of any team.

6. Contemplate the big picture.

Summer associates, especially at larger firms, routinely receive assignments consisting of discrete tasks. For example, you may be assigned to research one isolated issue relating to a large multi-argument summary judgment motion.

All too often, after that discrete task is completed, associates will simply move on to a new and different discrete task for another client matter, and never look back on the prior assignment.

The better approach is to show interest in the entire case by contemplating the big picture and thinking through how your assignment fits into the overall strategy and goal of the client matter.

Be proactive and deliberate when discussing your assignment, and communicate an interest in learning more about the matter. Granted, as a summer associate, the short time that you are part of the firm will often preclude you from being able to participate in other portions of the case.

However, if there is an upcoming trial or court hearing, ask if you could come watch even when you go back to school, assuming you attend law school in the same city where you are a summer associate.

At a minimum, circle back with the assigning attorney at some point when you are back at school, and, in a polite and unintrusive manner, ask how things turned out.

These actions will help showcase your continued interest in the case and in working with that attorney at that law firm. Following legal matters to their ultimate resolution will afford the experience and knowledge you need to become an effective attorney, and will establish relationships with senior attorneys that will keep you busy and valuable, should you get an offer to join the firm.

Partners appreciate and want to work with proactive critical thinking team players, as opposed to just a piecemeal participant. Reach out, follow up, go observe, and otherwise keep tabs on the case and interact with those working on the case.

By communicating your thoughts about, and your interest in, the whole client matter, you will set yourself up for significant success.

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