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MARKETING THE LAW FIRM

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# Professional Development: The Key to Successful Summer Programs

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

Summer has just passed, and we are all heavily involved in the final months of the year. Nevertheless, now is the time to prepare for next summer, and here is why.

## Legal Education: Pluses and Minuses

The manner and method of legal education has not changed much in the past century. Law schools, for the most part, use the Socratic method to teach students how to “think like a lawyer.” But even today, very few schools prepare their students for the actual practice of law ‘ how to survive and thrive.

In fact, a recent survey commissioned by LexisNexis’ reported that 95% of hiring partners believe recent graduates lack key practical skills. In schools that do offer those practical skills programs, the skills are usually taught in a classroom setting. These programs can only go so far in teaching the realities of practicing in the competitive and changing world of law. A firm’s summer program is where the commitment to professional development is established upfront.

## Setting Up an Appropriate Training Curriculum

In the past, few firms were willing to appropriately invest the resources necessary for a comprehensive training curriculum. Fortunately, this has changed. In the 1990s, many firms, realizing that legal education does not end with law school, instituted professional development departments that offered an assortment of training programs. It is estimated that some firms spend approximately \$19,000 a year to train new associates. By starting with comprehensive training during the summer, you can assure the training dollars are well spent once the student becomes a new associate. So it’s time to plan ahead for next year.

## Substantive Legal Training

Many of today’s firm programs focus on substantive legal skill training. As an added bonus, these programs are also instrumental in assisting summer associates in attaining practical, necessary skills ‘ not just during their summer with the firm, but throughout their legal careers. Attending programs throughout the summer is key in helping students establish a core skill set they will carry with them throughout their professional careers.

You might ask why, as law students, they should be concerned about professional development ‘ they are not yet professionals. Ahh ‘ but they are. While summer associates are not licensed attorneys, they are engaged in the law and must conform to the standards of the legal profession. Law schools and firms alike recognize that their experienced professionals have a wealth of valuable knowledge to impart, and, therefore, should collaborate (or at least work in tandem) in developing future lawyers. Even the ABA noted that law firms should play a role in infusing educational significance, increasing the educational content, and creating workshops supporting the enriching aspects of the summer work experience.

## **Career-Related Knowledge**

**1. Career Development.** Not unlike a law school’s career services office, the professional development department is the primary career-development resource. It serves as an exchange center for personal and career exploration. It should also include one-on-one counseling and guidance on issues like work/life balance, specialization, outside activities (e.g., bar associations, community and civic organizations), and partnership alternatives. It can help the student identify how to take formal training to a practical level.

**2. Mentoring.** Through either a formal or informal program, summer associates should have one or more mentors providing support and guidance throughout the summer. Mentors can offer guidance on receiving varied work assignments, balancing workloads, navigating the firm’s culture and selecting beneficial professional development courses. Mentors also provide one of the best opportunities to receive immediate, practical learning in the form of shadowing, tag-alongs and/or “at-the-elbow” instruction ‘ both in and outside of the office.

**3. Coaching.** A number of firms have a full-time career counselor or manager on their professional development team. Some are lawyers while others come from the corporate world. Many firms have paid for their coaches to be certified so they are well trained in the nuances of coaching. What is the difference, you ask, between mentors and coaches? Mentors give advice and teach skills. A coach challenges and lets the individuals drive the discussion, allowing them to reach their own conclusion.

**4. Networking.** Many law students use professional development events as a way to build a legal career network. Summer associates discover that professional development staff, mentors and the workshop presenters or facilitators become the foundation of professional contacts that can mean the difference between “just a job” and an “exciting legal career.” Most employers provide a variety of events for summer associates for social interaction with their peers, as well as seasoned professionals.

**5. Legal Skill Building.** This is what most people associate with professional development ‘ teaching and reinforcing core skills in areas such as research and advanced writing, oral advocacy and legal-related software. Professional development also coaches soft skills such as client counseling, team building, problem solving, conflict resolution, negotiation and business development.

Many professional development departments develop and offer a variety of skill level programs in each topic. In some instances, an academy or boot camp type format is employed offering myriad required and elective courses for summer associates. These courses should be accessible in-house or externally through online legal educational groups.

**6. Pro Bono Activities.** Additionally, the professional development department can assist students in identifying pro bono opportunities that offer practical application of skills. Many law schools have mandatory pro bono requirements. Those that do not strongly suggest that students engage in community service. Work on behalf of the public interest is both informative and rewarding and is often built into a firm’s culture.

**7. General Skill Building.** Even top students from top law schools may need skill refreshers or initial training. This especially can be the case if the student went straight to law school after earning an undergraduate degree. In addition to the legal skills courses, professional development departments often present programs on etiquette, teamwork, leadership development, organization and time management, effective communication, and working with superiors, peers and support staff.

**8. Evaluations.** In cooperation with the supervisors and the recruiting department, the professional development department may manage the summer associates' performance reviews. These evaluations, which take note of the summer associates' use of professional development opportunities, should be used in deciding who will receive offers of permanent employment. Additionally, students should be encouraged to evaluate the summer associate program ' what worked and what did not ' which is critical in sustaining the firm's continuing professional development efforts.

## **Conclusion**

Successful summer programs are no longer solely about wining and dining prospective associates. A well-balanced summer program is a good mix of connections and engagement, exposure to cutting-edge legal issues and challenging matters, as well as community service, camaraderie, exposure to leadership, and professional development.

The mission of a professional development department is to provide summer associates with essential knowledge, skills and abilities. The department's offerings should include mentoring, print and electronic resources, programs, seminars, workshops, forums, and special projects.

By utilizing this wide array of opportunities, both the firm and the student benefit. The students gain by taking advantage of the firm's resources, thus becoming more knowledgeable and successful attorneys. The benefit to the firm regarding its efforts becomes apparent once the student joins as a new associate and can hit the ground running.

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**Sharon Meit Abrahams, Ed.D**, a member of this newsletter's Board of Editors, is National Director of Professional Development at Foley & Lardner, where she coaches attorneys to be more productive and profitable while enjoying their practice. She may be reached at [sabrahams@foley.com](mailto:sabrahams@foley.com).

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