

## How To Find That One Summer Associate Worth Hiring

By **Chelsea Naso**

*Law360, New York (June 26, 2014, 1:52 PM ET)* -- Summer is officially here and for law firms around the country, that means brand-new summer associates are buzzing around the office trying to prove they have what it takes to hack it in their desired practice area.

It's fair to say that law students who land summer associate positions have the necessary academic credentials. However, book smarts can only take a budding attorney so far, leaving law firms to weed through a pool of eager 2Ls to find the best of the best based on other qualities, like their personality, relationship skills and ability to take criticism.

"There's no magic formula," said Chris Rogers, a Haynes and Boone LLP partner who serves as the chair of the firm's summer associate committee. "It can be challenging, in 20 or 30 minutes, to decide which interviewees will be thoughtful and conscientious co-workers who will exhibit the level of care and diligence required by partners and our clients."

Here, Law360 lays out four ways to find that shining star in your 2014 class of summer associates:

### **Offer Real-World Experiences**

While learning to accomplish and manage everyday office work is an important aspect of becoming an effective attorney, summer associates should really be given an opportunity to gain so-called real-world experiences, Rogers said.

Putting summer associates in front of clients and in the mix of litigation or deal negotiations not only gives them the opportunity to learn from more experienced attorneys, but it also allows firms to see how they react in certain situations.

"There are plenty of opportunities for summer associates to demonstrate competence in day-to-day work, but seeing them out 'in the field' gives you a different perspective on their skills and abilities, so we try to maximize our opportunities to see our summer associates with teams in court, in negotiations, and in front of clients," Rogers said.

Tasking summer associates with complex problems also allow firms to identify if their summer associates possess the qualities that are the foundation for strong partners. Jonathan Kagan, an Irell & Manella LLP partner who heads the summer associate program, said the firm gives its budding attorneys legal questions to solve that rarely have a simple answer to see if they have the intellectual curiosity and

creativity they need to stand out.

"Almost every assignment has the capability of letting those qualities show. It's the difference between someone coming back and answering the precise legal question they were given verse someone who really thinks and gives a more complete answer. Are you just answering the question asked or are you thinking about the problem and finding a solution?" Kagan said.

### **Let Them Fail**

No one is going to come out of his or her second year of law school with the knowledge and experience of a senior partner. While the summer associate program is designed to see if the students can really live up to the high standards of a top-notch law firm, not all of them will succeed at every challenge, said Amy Crouch, a Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP partner who heads the firm's search committee.

"They are evaluated on their work product, but understanding they are law students, we don't expect them to perform at the level of an experienced associate. At the end of the summer, we ask ourselves, 'Have they improved? Do they have a desire to learn? How did they handle any negative feedback?'" she said.

Letting summer associates fail can be a strong indicator of how they will handle constructive criticism, negative feedback and pressure in the workplace, Kagan said. By the end of the summer, firms should have a strong gauge on who the best of their summer class is not just by who got the best marks, but also by who faced failure and learned from it.

"The program is really about seeing if the summer associates can live up to those really high standards that we expect from them," Kagan said.

### **Emphasize Culture**

Culture plays an incredibly important role in law firms, drawing a firm's many attorneys and practice areas together with one succinct approach to tackling challenging legal issues. Each firm has its own recipe, but they often include qualities like enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity and collaborative nature.

Regardless of which qualities a firm values most, it's important to identify those skills within summer associates to make sure that along with having the academic credentials, they also have the personality qualities that allow them to fit into or balance out the team, Rogers said.

"For us, a good summer associate is someone who fits our culture and style of practice. Our firm is very teamwork-focused so we look for candidates that are excited about being part of that environment," Rogers said.

Pulling the summer associates into the culture early on and making them feel like part of the team can also help ensure that their experience at the firm is a positive one, which can increase the chances of retaining the strongest summer associates after graduation, Kagan noted.

"Being a summer associate here is really a great way to start bonding with the firm and forming the ties that hold us together. Learning that culture really starts with the summer program," he said.

## Help Them Build Relationships

Building relationships with clients is an important aspect of becoming a successful attorney down the line, but building strong relationships with co-workers is also essential. Summer associates should be given an opportunity to meet with the different practice areas, participate in projects and attend social events to help build internal relationships, Crouch said.

"The program is a blend of investigating the different divisions we have at the firm while they complete a variety of projects, participate in practical skills training, and also attend social events, if they choose," she said. "We place a lot of emphasis on collegiality. We want people who we know are going to work well on our case teams."

Helping foster those relationships can allow firms to get a taste for who each summer associate is as an individual, and can also flourish into mentorships that guide summer associates through the early years of their careers as attorneys. This not only aids retention, but also helps continue a firm's culture.

"Our goal in getting through the summer is to have our incoming summer associates succeed. We try to pair them with mentors and supervisors who will match their skill sets and practice area interests. Throughout the process, we're trying to find the best fit between our summer associates and our firm's needs," Rogers said.

--Editing by Elizabeth Bowen and Katherine Rautenberg.