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Ten tips for law firms on making the most of a summer associate program

Summer is a great time of year. For those of us who are involved in associate recruiting at law firms, this is one of our busiest times. We are now deep in the throes of summer associate programs and also gearing up for on-campus interviewing. As national hiring partner and associate recruiting director at DLA Piper and the former Chicago office hiring partner for five years, I know the drill very well.

Having run many summer programs over the years, I have learned a lot about what works well and what doesn't, both for law students as well as for the firm.

These internships are invaluable for the participants — in my last column, I discussed 10 takeaways for summer associates at firms to help them get the most out of their summer experience.

But these internships are likewise incredibly important for a firm's recruiting efforts and growth strategy. As firms continue to develop these programs year after year, they should take lessons learned and refine their programs from one summer to the next.

The following is my top-10 list of tips for law firms who are using summer programs as a tool for recruiting law students.

1. Give an accurate snapshot of life at the firm. This sounds easy, but is harder than it looks. Firms will often wine and dine summer associates all summer long. It is easy for time to fly by without getting much work done unless law students are diligent about completing a steady stream of projects along the way.

It is essential for firms to hold summer associates accountable for getting this work done. Indeed, it is the volume, pressure and juggling of all of these responsibilities that provide students with an accurate snapshot of an associate's life and gives law firms much-needed information to effectively make hiring decisions.

2. Set out clear expectations. Being a new employee is never easy — particularly one's first job as a professional. Working at a law firm is no exception. Do yourself and your summer associates a favor by discussing with them early on what the expectations are for their summer experience and exactly how they will be evaluated.

This will help set the tone and get law students started on the right foot. These conversations should also address what the expectations are for incoming associates.

3. Communicate about performance early and often. Giving real-time, frequent and honest feedback regarding one's performance is one of the most meaningful ways firms can help ensure summer associates stay on the right track. This is particularly true given the limited duration of these programs — three months or less — and a lot can change quickly during that time, both for better and worse, during this period.

4. It's not just about doing great work. Determining whether someone is a good fit is often more of an art than a science. There are a number of important factors, and doing great work is not the be-all and end-all.

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The summer associate's overall compatibility with the organization beyond his or her work product is just as important as the work itself. The summer associate's personality, ability to collaborate and take cues from the environment are among many important factors. Keep these qualities in mind.

5. Have a tight group running

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the summer program. These attorneys need to communicate well and must be in complete alignment about what a successful program looks like. This group need to be comprised of attorneys who are highly successful in their own right and have demonstrated an ability to thrive at the firm. These individuals will be a good influ-

ence on your summer associates. After all, success begets success.

6. Be mindful of different generational mindsets. Ours is a multigenerational workforce. As we evaluate law students and lateral attorneys for our organizations, we must take into consideration the various attitudes and working styles which are a by-product of the different genera-

tions in our workplace.

This can be a difficult needle to thread, and while we need to be respectful of differences, we must also be realistic in our assessment as to whether there are enough similarities and synergies with candidates such that the working arrangement is likely to succeed.

7. Don't override good, sound judgment. Whether you are trying to decide whether your summer associates should get permanent offers, or if you should be extending a summer offer to a student you met during callbacks, there is no substitute for good, sound judgment.

Among other things, this means that the decision to hire should be a relatively easy one, and if you find yourself struggling with it, that usually means the answer is no.

8. Have the right people doing the interviewing. Just as you need the right people running your summer program, the firm needs strong representation for its on-campus and callback interviews. These attorneys are the face of the firm and will be key in determining the types of individuals you will attract in your recruiting activities.

9. Have a clear protocol in place for vetting candidates. What is your firm hoping to find in its quest for talent? What questions are you going to ask, and what types of answers are you looking for? The firm's recruiting team should have a well-defined approach in place for identifying and locking in talent that is most likely to succeed at the firm.

10. Ask summer associates to assist with your on-campus recruiting efforts. The value of this approach should not be underestimated. This summer's interns can provide powerful testimonials to other law students you are trying to attract.

Think strategically about how to leverage all of the goodwill that you engendered during the summer to help you get the most out of your recruiting efforts this fall.