

How Firms Can Effectively Evaluate Their Summer Associates

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For most law firms, summer associate programs are well underway and will be consuming most of your days for the next few weeks.

Across the board, regardless of the size or type of law firm, the goal is simple: Provide a well-rounded, educational and fun experience for your summer associates. So, how do you do that?

One of the most effective ways is to ensure that you and your team are engaging in a timely and meaningful evaluation process — one that's comprehensive, relevant and precise.

Today's future attorneys value detailed and thoughtful feedback — in fact, they almost crave it.

"What is your firm's review process or method for feedback during the summer?" Raise your hand if you've heard that question during on-campus interviews. Of course, you have.

Can you blame them for asking? Of course, everyone always wants to hear that they're doing a great job, but what about the more difficult conversations? The conversations we sometimes shy away from because they are uncomfortable. The conversations that, in the end, could have a substantially greater impact than, "You're doing great. Keep up the good work."

We'll get to those difficult conversations later. For now, let's discuss when evaluations should occur, what criteria the summer associates should be evaluated on and who should be involved in the process.

When Evaluations Should Occur

Traditionally, law firms conduct a midpoint and end-of-program performance evaluation. The midpoint review can be more informal — a time to touch base and make sure everyone is on the same page in terms of expectations.

If not, make a course correction. This is a great opportunity to check in with your team to ensure your summer associates are set up for success.

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The more formal and detailed review will occur at the end of the program.

Utilizing evaluation software through your human resources information system or applicant tracking system will make this process much easier for all involved. These systems may provide the ability to track the status of the evaluation and automate the process, taking additional work off your team's plate.

What Criteria Should Be Addressed

Each law firm will have a unique set of expectations, but some suggested criteria that are commonly used include:

- Overall work product;
- Ability to interpret and apply legal concepts to factual situations;
- Demonstrated skill in research, analysis and writing;
- Ability to complete assignments on time;
- Ability to interact professionally with clients, attorneys and staff;
- Responsiveness to emails, voicemails and overall requests; and
- Demonstrated initiative to get new assignments, network within the firm and attend firm events.

Most law firms utilize a rating scale for associate performance evaluations. You may want to consider mirroring your law firm's rating scale for summer associate reviews so that they can be exposed to how they will be evaluated should they join the firm as a first-year associate.

Who Should Be Involved in the Evaluation Process

The more participants, the better. A best practice is to gather feedback from all attorneys, including associates, that have tasked the summer associates with assignments.

This creates the added bonus of providing an opportunity for your junior associates to get experience with providing feedback as their own careers develop.

Ask the summer associate to provide a list of everyone they completed an assignment for to ensure no one is being left out of the process.

Top 6 Considerations

Beyond this, what overarching considerations should law firms keep in mind when evaluating summer associates?

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1. Commit to the process, and take the time.

This is probably the most difficult part, as attorneys are busy people. Don't rush through the evaluation process.

Many attorneys want to fix the problem and move on, but keep in mind that someone took the time to show you — and now it's your turn to pay it forward.

2. Explain why.

Explaining the "why" behind certain feedback helps the summer associate understand the full picture.

For example, one of your summer associates needs to respond to emails timelier. Consider explaining the importance of responsiveness, both internally with your fellow colleagues, and externally with clients and opposing counsel. Responsiveness is tied to reputation.

3. Be kind, but firm.

On the heels of Well-Being in Law Week and Mental Health Awareness Month, it's important to do our part to embrace and support mental health. Difficult discussions are inevitable, but there is a way to deliver the message constructively with kindness.

The sandwich technique — improvement feedback "sandwiched" between two positive statements — is a phrase many of us are familiar with, and there is a reason why. It works.

4. Be clear and concise.

Ensure the summer associate understands the directions you are giving them and the tasks you are assigning. Encourage open dialogue.

5. Offer real-time feedback.

As mentioned above, evaluations typically happen at two key points during the summer program. However, law firms should consider providing the summer associates feedback on a rolling basis. Law school students want and expect this.

Feedback and performance improvement should be part of our daily routine, but it rarely is. Be intentional, and point out when improvement can be made and when a good job is done in real-time.

6. It's a two-way street.

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It's important to remember that summer associate programs are reciprocal interviews.

Keep in mind that, while you are assessing the summer associate, they are also assessing your firm and asking themselves, "Is this a place where someone will take an interest in my growth and development? Is this an environment that I will thrive in? Do I see myself here long term?"

If the answer is yes to all, then your summer associate program is a success.

A Note for the Summer Associates

For the summer associates out there, if your review didn't go exactly as you'd hoped, don't let that get you down. Use the evaluation as it is intended — as a tool for guidance on what you can do to improve.

Remember that you are in law school and still learning. Instead of getting discouraged, use the feedback as fuel to galvanize you. Be kind to yourself.

Good luck, and have a great summer!

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