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"Saying Goodbye to Summer Associates"

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It's now more than halfway through July, and the summer associate class of 2007 is getting ready to leave the beautifully appointed firm offices and head back to the hallowed halls of academia.

As the summer comes to a close, I'd like to share some parting words, some things I would have liked to have known when I was clerking - a commencement speech, of sorts, to the summer associates of 2007.

Get used to the billable hour. There has been plenty of news about firms wanting to explore alternative billing options. Well, people talk about universal health care, too, and I don't see that happening anytime soon.

The billable hour continues to be the financial backbone of the legal profession. There will always be firms that represent clients on a contingent-fee basis and boutiques that offer some kind of alternative billing. But the big boys - the firms that set the standard - still rely on the billable hour.

The lawyer's job is to learn how to do it right. One of the prime irritants to those of us supervising new lawyers is having to rewrite their billing descriptions. New lawyers should read senior lawyers' billing descriptions, and mimic their style and thoroughness. Do they call the client Ms. Smith or Jane? Do they use informal language? How do they describe a meeting, telephone call, research or drafting of documents?

No one wants to be the associate whose billing entries always need to be rewritten. We talk badly about those people at the secret partners' meetings.

Find out how long a task should take and bill that. Now, this only applies if the actual time was longer than that. If it took 18 hours to draft something that should have taken five, bill the five. But if you're some kind of prodigy and it only took four, bill the four. Don't get greedy.

Do whatever it takes to shine. My second year out of law school - my first year in Texas - the partner I worked for told me to do a Securities and Exchange Commission filing called a Form 8 something or other for a deal. But his Texas accent was so heavy I couldn't tell if he said 8A, 8E or 8O. I was lost. Of course, it was due first thing the next morning.

I didn't want to risk offending him, so I stayed late and figured out all the possibilities, came up with two, and did both of them. When he came in the next morning and asked for it, I was able to tell what he was saying and turned in the right one.

Long story short, the instructions from superiors may not always be crystal clear. It will take a fair amount of time scrambling and learning lingo. That's just part of the job description. Get used to it.

No job is too menial. Sadly, a law degree doesn't liberate someone from making coffee or stapling documents. At one of my first closings, my only job was photocopying, because the senior partner had no clue how to work the machine. I was thrilled, because it was the one thing I did know how to do. After the closing was completed I actually had a sense of accomplishment.

Whatever your job is, own it.

Always treat staff as professionals. Many lawyers treat colleagues who didn't go to law school with a bit of disdain. Don't follow their lead.

Secretaries, paralegals, receptionists, librarians, the people who work in the copy room - all of them deserve respect. They can be lawyers' best allies or worst enemies. You really don't want the person who brings your coffee to dislike you.

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Find out what the firm isn't revealing. What is the firm's real culture, as opposed to what the hiring partner says it is. Who are the powerful partners - they don't always have powerful titles - and which practice groups really run the show? Who works for whom? Who is on the A list? This can take some time and some discreet detective work. But knowing who really runs the show and why can help demystify how the firm works and provide a leg up.

How can someone at the bottom of the power structure figure this out? Watch and listen. Whom do the senior associates scramble to work for? Notice who calls the shots and appears to make decisions for the office. Those things offer a clue about who wields the power.

Figure out what area of law is the best fit. The summer should have provided an opportunity to get real-world experience in various areas of the law. Before deciding whether to accept a full-time associate offer from a summer firm - or any firm - figure out whether that firm really does the kind of work that interests you and does it well. Of course, the big firms will say they do everything, but they may not really have their hearts in your chosen area.

If they do the kind of work you hope to focus on, do they need junior lawyers? And are the lawyers working in that section the kind of people with whom you want to spend 60 hours a work? Because long after the memories of all those free lunches and summer social outings have faded, you're going to put in lots of long hours with them.

On behalf of firms everywhere, it is our hope that you've enjoyed your summer - the coffee bars, the sporting events and maybe even the bona fide legal work. Go out and make us proud.

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