



# How to Make the Most of your Summer Job

tips for succeeding in  
and learning from  
your work experience this summer

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# ***How to Make the Most of Your Summer Job***

You found the summer job of your dreams. You'll arrive there in June, perhaps to a new city, most likely to a new set of colleagues and supervisors, and definitely to an opportunity to gain experience and insight into the legal profession. How can you best prepare yourself for success this summer? Listen to those who have been in your shoes before, 2Ls and 3Ls who have spent their summers in public interest. Over the past few years, OPIA has hosted panel discussions at which 2Ls and 3Ls have shared their thoughts on how they have made the most of their summers during law school. Below are some of their suggestions for how you can maximize your work experience over the summer.

There are obviously some things you cannot control, so always keep a good sense of humor and have fun. As Justin Levitt ('01) advises, you should "treat yourselves well."

## **1. It's Not Just a Summer Job**

- Resist the temptation to think of this as *just* a summer job; instead, think of it as your first opportunity to practice law. This is your chance to figure out where you want to go professionally. So think independently: do not structure your summer around what the other interns are doing. What might be of extreme interest to them might totally bore you.
- View your summer in the context of your whole law school experience. How do the pieces fit together and complement one another?
- What do lawyers really do? Amass as many different kinds of experience as you can. Sample different kinds of lawyering—different kinds of writing and research.

## **2. Getting Started**

- Be PROACTIVE. This was the recurring piece of advice in this year's Summer Job Panel, and it cannot be stressed enough. Being proactive does not mean being demanding, pushy, or obnoxious. It simply means stating your goals on the front-end and establishing clear lines of communication between you and your supervisor.
- Simply finding that awesome job is not enough. (It's a good start, though.) You have already narrowed down a huge pool of choices by selecting one job in one sector, but you also need to think about what specific things you want to learn *within* the field. For

example, if you are going to the California A.G.'s office, you should consider whether you want to sit in on depositions, witness attorney/client interaction, and/or be in the courtroom.

- Be honest about your strengths and weaknesses when applying for jobs, and let potential employers know your expectations for your summer work experience.
- Do the necessary research about an organization before beginning work there. Find out about the board of directors, funding sources, relevant cases, and future goals. Should your project fall through, this kind of information will be extremely valuable in suggesting a new project.
- It is important to study how a particular organization impacts the community in which it is located. If it is a public service organization, what is its place in the larger network of local and/or national organizations? If it is a government agency, where does it fit into the government structure as a whole?
- Investigate office personalities before you arrive. Find a great supervisor based on past students' experiences.

### **3. On the Job**

- Lay low during the first week. Try to attach yourself to someone who looks like they are doing work that interests you and who seems like a good attorney.
- Start reading local newspapers--it's a great way to keep up with local events and issues that may affect your work.
- Be aware of office politics--don't step on any toes! Be super-nice to your office's administrative staff. Never take them for granted. You should be nice to everyone, but if you're working in an agency or organization that is on a tight budget, befriending the keeper of the supply closet key would be an especially good idea.
- Become involved in the office--go to meetings, go to COURT, get feedback in both formal and informal settings. For example, you might want to accompany co-workers on their coffee breaks, go on tours or ride-alongs, or attend brown-bag lunches. Sometimes the best moment to catch attorneys, and especially the overworked and inaccessible attorneys, is during lunch breaks or smoke breaks.
- Be flexible. You might not have a permanent office or the technological resources that you're used to. You can be creative and find other workspaces, like empty conference rooms or office libraries. Don't let these things distract you from the valuable experience you can gain by doing the work and getting immersed in your organization.

- Take responsibility for defining your role. Don't let yourself be exploited -- "free" does not equal "disposable." Keep a running dialogue about your work with your employer in order to avoid conflicts that could arise from miscommunication. Discuss with your employer the number of hours you will be working per week and the particular projects that interest you most.
- Acknowledge that while you may be a summer intern, you are still a part of the organization's staff. Take your responsibilities seriously and professionally. Some of your co-workers this summer may end up being your colleagues later on!
- If you find an attorney who impresses you and with whom you'd like to work, tell her that you would like to help her with anything you can.
- Take control of your situation. Find the work that you want to do. Listen carefully to attorneys. When they say, "I wish I had time to...", you could say, "I can help you with that."
- Print out interesting articles from Lexis and the internet and pass them around to attorneys in order to elicit interest in helping them work on relevant cases.
- Adhere to escalation theory in your attempts to sign on to various projects. If you see a project or issue that interests you, ask to do a lesser version of the overall work. Do a stellar job on it and you will be given more and more responsibility.
- Find out what attorneys in your office hate to do/don't have time to do and offer to do it if it interests you.

#### **4. What to Wear**

- Ask your supervisors about a dress code before you start.
- Suits are usually not necessary.
- Try to dress professionally at least for your first few days on the job.
- Model the attorneys.

#### **5. Establishing a Relationship with Your Supervisor**

- Everyone is busy. Supervisors don't always know how to best use or manage interns. Even though they're busy, they hired you and they owe you a certain level of supervision. Be assertive in getting it.

- It is often difficult to get structured feedback. Try to schedule weekly meetings with your supervisor. Stay after 6 p.m. and you'll have more opportunities for feedback: clients stop calling, support staff goes home and you can catch your supervisor.
- The best feedback is how attorneys react to you and whether or not you're given new projects and other responsibilities.
- Never be afraid to ask questions or admit that you don't know what you're doing--you're there to learn! You'll get better and better at condensing your questions and being efficient in how you ask them. Use other interns and attorneys to look over your written work or to ask questions. "Here are my ideas. What do you think?" Your fellow interns can serve as a great resource and also as a sounding board.
- Be careful how you identify yourself when dealing with people outside of the organization. For example, you may want to say that you're "working with Attorney X" rather than "interning with Association Y," or vice-versa.

## **6. Work It**

- Yes, it really is all about who you know. Ask yourself how you can meet a variety of lawyers in and out of your office. Have lunch, go to meetings with attorneys who interest you, attend training sessions offered. Pick the attorneys' brains for contacts in the area: ask about the legal culture in your city, about firms, judges, and organizations. Later if you decide you want to clerk, you may have done some of the necessary research!
- Talk to people. Let people know your interests. Chances are they can introduce you to someone with similar interests. Link up with friends working in the area and share contacts with them. Let each other know about events in the area.
- Call alums living in the area who are working, or have worked, in fields that interest you--get their contact information from OPIA's mentor binders.
- Don't just hang out with other interns at lunch; join the attorneys. They often discuss current work and this can give you ideas for extra projects, etc. Plus you'll form friendships. However, be aware of how you blend your personal and professional relationships while at work. Students working abroad should be especially mindful of cultural differences that may affect the office environment.
- You don't have to do lunch if that style of networking doesn't feel comfortable to you. Talk to people working in a particular field during your research. Ask them for names of other people you should talk to. Touch base with them after your initial conversation, keep them up to date as your work develops, ask them if they'd be willing to give you feedback on drafts, ask them if they'd like a copy of your final work.

When you get someone's business card, write where you met them on the back of the card for future reference.

- Tell the people who you connect with in a particular field what kind of work you are committed to and that you know they feel similarly. Ask them to let you know if you can ever help them.
- Some public interest communities are very tight, e.g. human rights, labor rights, and you will come across the same names over and over again. Email the people you meet, keep your name in their consciousness and vice versa.

## 7. Writing

- If you know that one of your goals is to get a writing sample by the end of the summer, let that be known on the front end and that way, you and your supervisor can discuss a writing assignment that will be of use to you *and* the organization.
- Make your first piece of writing outstanding. This will set the precedent for how the rest of your work is regarded and the kind of future assignments you will receive.
- Bring your LRA book with you—it has instructions on how to write memos, briefs, etc.
- Westlaw is not useful for international research. Ask ahead of time which books/resources you should bring with you.
- There is no such thing as a draft. When writing a memo, be sure that your introduction outlines the question you are tackling so that it will make sense as the case evolves and mutates. Make sure you are answering the question – before you churn out ten pages, email your initial thoughts on the subject and where you plan to go with them to your supervisor. When you are done, staple relevant cases to the back.
- Some research questions have no definite answers.
- Be sure to come up with a strong writing sample by the end of the summer. Work hard, cite well, and polish at least one piece of written work during the summer. One that you've gotten a lot of feedback on is especially good.
- Good writing samples include court motions and memos. In human rights you'll probably do less traditional writing; you might have a harder time coming up with a writing sample.
- A major research project during your second summer can turn into a third year paper. Try to get your work published.

- Most of your research won't have answers because it's unique and new. You often won't know when you're done. Is it not there or do you not know where to look?
- Public interest organizations don't have the same resources as firms. Ask them what resources they have and how they share resources so you don't offend anyone in the organization. Most public interest organizations rely primarily on books because they can't afford to do computer research. You might consider extending your subscription to Lexis/Nexis and Westlaw over the summer. Local law school libraries are also great resources for research.
- If you write something you're proud of and your supervisors at your job permit it, send copies to some of the experts in the field for their comments. You might make new connections.

## **8. Explore and Reflect**

- During and after the summer, think through and write down what you enjoyed and what you didn't. Record your impressions of your work to note how they changed over the summer. If keeping a journal isn't for you, take a handful of the 1L OPIA employment surveys and fill one out every couple of weeks to keep track of your experience and what you learned.
- Put out feelers for what you'd like to do during your second summer. If you can get a few hours off, try to visit another organization or firms you think you'd like to work for.
- Periodically get together with the other interns in your office and brainstorm things you'd like to learn/do. Example: A fieldtrip to visit a prison where the majority of your incarcerated clients are sent.
- Shadow people with whom the attorneys regularly work, such as social workers and police officers.

## **9. Getting Recommendations**

- If you don't establish lasting relationships, ask for a recommendation before you leave at the end of the summer. Present your recommender with a bullet-point list of your summer accomplishments.
- Keep a record of every project you work on and a file of everything you write so you can be specific about what you did later on.
- Try to stay in touch with one or more supervisors. If you've really connected with one of them, write or email them even as the years go by.

## **10. Mental Health**

- Don't be afraid to turn down assignments if you feel overwhelmed. You know your limits better than anyone--if you try to do too much, your work and personal life will suffer. Summer work should build your confidence in your own abilities. Speaking of a personal life, you CAN and SHOULD have one-- don't forget that summer is not only a time to explore various aspects of legal work, it is also your vacation!
- Enjoy not being in school: read for pleasure, exercise, do whatever relaxes you. Try to get out of the office for lunch, and try to leave at a reasonable hour. Explore your new surroundings -- use OPIA's Cheap Living Guides, other guidebooks, and local papers for suggestions. Make a list of everything you want to do during the summer, then get out there and do it! Call other students in the area, make friends at work or at local law schools, and invite them along.
- Keep in touch with friends at firms, ask them about the work that they get to do and share your experiences with them. Your contact could result in added pro bono help.
- Coming from Harvard Law School elicits different reactions from different people, so you may or may not be treated differently as a result. The best suggestion is to be open to new people and new ideas, and to be professional in all situations.
- Get some downtime before you start work and/or after you finish, even if it's just a few days.

**Good luck this summer! We look forward to hearing how it goes!**