

Spelling It Out: *Mentoring Is Critical For Summer Associates and All Attorneys*

By: Matthew M. Haar And Meri J. Kahan

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Matthew M. Haar is Saul Ewing's mentor program coordinator and focuses his practice on corporate and commercial litigation with an emphasis on complex insurance and reinsurance litigation. He can be contacted at 717-257-7508.

Meri J. Kahan is a manager of attorney recruitment with the firm's Baltimore office. She can be contacted at mkahan@saul.com.

Working as a summer associate is a fantastic way to sharpen your legal skills and get a taste of practicing law. A summer clerkship is exciting! It is probably the first time you are applying the abstract theories learned in law school to concrete cases and issues.

As a summer associate, you are sure to have a wide range of questions, from everyday issues such as expectations regarding work assignments, to big-picture concerns such as your future at the firm. The uncertain economic environment and the potential for a long-term employment opportunity may increase your anxiety. Where do you turn to help deal with these issues in your law firm?

The answer is simple: Find a mentor! Better yet, find several!

What is a mentor? There are many definitions, as the role can be broadly defined and take many forms. In the most general sense, however, a mentor provides guidance and advice to another person.

Many firms, including ours, have programs in place that match summer associates with attorneys who will act as their assigned mentor throughout the summer. Other firms do not have a formal infrastructure.

Either way, it is critical that you follow the guidelines below, which direct you to use the acronym "GET A MENTOR" to avail yourself of the many short- and long-term benefits a mentor relationship provides. (The acronym is a service mark, the property of the authors' firm.) If you do so, you will be poised to have a successful summer, and more importantly, ensure your growth and success as an attorney far beyond your summer associate position.

1. Good things don't always come to those who wait.

Your summer associate program is finite in its duration. You need to start creating mentor relationships immediately. From your first day, you should seek out those people who can help you have a wonderful summer experience and who can help you grow into a successful attorney. Relationships take time to come into their own, and since time is limited, you should tackle this task immediately. That being said, it's never too late to start! If you are reading this article and have already started your summer job but have not yet sought out a mentor, it is still worthwhile to begin to forge relationships now.

2. Engage others.

Finding a mentor doesn't require that you go up to an attorney and say the words, "Will you be my mentor?" Instead, simply seek out those people who may be helpful to your career.

If you have an interest in bankruptcy, approach a bankruptcy lawyer, introduce yourself, and explain your interest. Ask the attorney if s/he might want to have lunch together; then, use that time to ask about clients, specialty bar associations, and how to maintain a successful practice. Similarly, informally approaching an attorney for an opinion about handling deadlines or other issues can be a jumping-off point to start a mentor relationship.

3. Take control.

Whether or not you are assigned a mentor, it is up to you to build meaningful relationships. You are the person who must control your legal career. Mentoring is not a passive endeavor — it requires that you step forward and become active in your career. It is also up to you to dictate the substance and quality of your mentor relationship. Make it a priority to raise issues of concern to you. Do not assume your mentor can read your mind and knows what topics you would like to discuss.

4. Appreciate that one size doesn't fit all.

Formal and informal mentors coexist well because it is often difficult for one person to fill all of your needs. Mentors can be helpful in reviewing your legal writing, figuring out how to join a firm committee, advising you on the appropriate attire for a firm's annual picnic, and preparing a business plan. It is unlikely that just one person can help with all of these varied issues. A mentor can be an associate, a staff attorney, special counsel or a partner. Each attorney has different advice to bestow and a variety of perspectives to share. Bear in mind that there is no "prize" for having the most mentors. While more than one mentor may be valuable, always choose quality over quantity.

5. Make it work.

If you are assigned a mentor by your firm, this is a fantastic opportunity! Find out the firm's parameters for the mentoring program and make sure you take advantage of them. If you were supposed to have lunch with your mentor during the first week of the summer program, but you

were never contacted, take it upon yourself to contact your mentor. (It is likely s/ he got busy with a project — don't take it personally.)

Not every mentor relationship will be successful, but it shouldn't be because each person was waiting for the other to call. Similarly, if you scheduled a lunch with an informal mentor and s/he had to cancel, make sure to follow up and propose a new date.

Make sure you keep in touch with the individuals who mentored you over the summer. Thank them at the end of the summer with a handwritten note, invite them to a law school activity in which you are involved, or send an e-mail or pick up the phone to say hello. No relationship will sustain without continued effort and communication.

6. Edit yourself.

If you create strong mentor relationships, congratulations! But remember that you are still a summer associate, and one of your goals is presumably to get an offer of full-time employment. Don't fall into the trap of badmouthing anything or anyone to your mentor. Mentoring is not synonymous with gossiping. Not only is it bad form and makes you look unprofessional, it is possible that the mentor may feel obligated (or be required) to pass this information on to someone in firm management. So while you might forge a connection, remember that it is a professional relationship, and act accordingly.

7. Never become discouraged.

Remember that every attorney you approach may not have the time or inclination to be a mentor. Don't take this personally, and realize it is in your best interest. You do not want a mentor who does not, for whatever reason, have the capacity to mentor you. Simply approach someone else.

With formal mentor relationships, you should also bear in mind that many times the "match" is made using criteria such as a shared alma mater or a stated interest in a particular practice group. It is unlikely that every single match will result in a lifelong friendship. Don't confuse "friend" with "mentor." While they may overlap, they do not have to. A mentor can turn into a great friend, but every friend does not have to be a mentor.

8. Think long-term.

Don't write off your mentor relationship as just a "summer experience." Having a mentor throughout your professional career will be beneficial every step of the way. Learning to ride a bike is much easier if there is someone standing beside you who already knows how to ride. The same is true for the practice of law.

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9. Outside the firm.

Law firms, like lawyers, come in all shapes and sizes. You may find that your summer job does not offer all of the guidance you need. Think outside the box. Bar associations and other community groups can be great resources for mentors. Moreover, having mentors in multiple settings can help position you to take advantage of opportunities in a difficult legal market. A mentor can provide you guidance in a job search, assist with networking, and suggest alternatives if your career path changes over time.

10. Reap the benefits.

Not only will mentors be beneficial to your career, guiding you along the summer and beyond, but having mentors will make a bold statement to the firm's other attorneys. It demonstrates your commitment to your career and to the firm. More often than not, it will also demonstrate your dedication and enthusiasm. These are the types of traits that attorneys value and are found in the best lawyers.

During your summer associate employment, you are probably overwhelmed with all of the things you will have to balance: conflicting deadlines, submitting top-notch work product, and meeting new people, just to name a few. It may seem daunting to add "GET A MENTOR" to that lengthy list. But don't be short-sighted! Getting a mentor is getting an ally who will teach you the ways to tackle that list of tasks. More importantly, a great mentor will not only seamlessly shepherd you through a successful summer, but will continue to provide guidance throughout your legal career.

Bruce Armon, Saul Ewing's hiring partner, and Katayun Jaffari, the firm's chair of the career development committee, also contributed to this article.

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