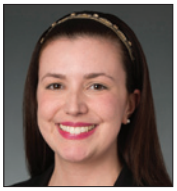
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Outside Counsel

Creating a Successful Virtual Summer Associate Program Amid COVID-19





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Despite an environment characterized by uncertainty, recruiting and retaining talented people remains a top priority for most premier law firms. The Herculean challenge faced by most firms was how to, in the middle of a pandemic, onboard, train, and entertain potential new hires in virtual summer programs.

Summer associate programs are central to the culture of most firms. They are, in effect, apprenticeships, and expose new lawyers to life in a law firm, as well as real client matters. Incoming associates learn from industry leaders, engage with clients, and get an appreciation of the fabric of the firm. Shifting to a virtual environment left much of that programming in the balance. This year, most summer associates found themselves sitting in front of a computer in their living rooms, home offices, and bedrooms, preparing to take the first steps toward developing meaningful relationships with the attorneys and business services professionals in firms where they hope to start their careers.

When our firm welcomed 75 summer associates in June, we knew the success of the virtual program would depend on the commitment of our attorneys and business services professionals who were dedicating their time and expertise in a completely new environment.

Our program shrank from 10 weeks to 5, which meant that being efficient was more important than ever. To ensure that participants got the most out of the program we focused on three specific aspects—access, flexibility and inclusion. Workplace culture, and the way individuals engage with one another, largely depends on the accessibility of people and the availability of resources, having built-in flexibility and avoiding a "one size fits all" approach, and inclusiveness, so that individuals feel connected and know they are welcome to engage professionally and personally.

Access

How do you facilitate access to people and resources when you have no physical workplace and people need to connect to one another in an entirely virtual environment? During our program this year, every practice head and

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department chair worked together to share vital industry knowledge and and create opportunities for associates to ask questions and listen to feedback. Ensuring extended access provided the opportunity to answer questions and connect on a personal level. Additionally, we assigned virtual office mates to each summer associate and connected them with the attorneys and business services professionals with whom they would have interacted in person if we had been operating in a physical office. This helped create open lines of communication, so summer associates felt they could reach out at any time with questions or concerns.

Without being able to meet in person, developing relationships with mentors and others was tough. For example, how do you create a "virtual environment" where new attorneys know that it is okay to follow up if they have questions? With that in mind, we advised summer associates on the best ways to follow up and to initiate a strong personal connection; so, hopefully, they were comfortable picking up the phone, writing an email, or sending a video chat request. Summer associates were more likely to reach out to attorneys who left their virtual "door" open and made it clear that they had a standing invitation to engage. Using these virtual connections, our attorneys and business services professionals sent emails introducing themselves and invited summer associates for coffee dates. These appointments offered increased connectivity, and the various modes of communication—notes, emails, instant messages, video chats—became strong touch points. We found that these interactions helped summer associates build connections with individuals they otherwise might not have had the opportunity to meet.

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Flexibility

During the program, flexibility was particularly important, as we introduced our summer associates to new communication platforms, balanced various technology comfort levels, and managed schedules to accommodate people working in different time zones. Despite these challenges, the virtual format provided a unique advantage because summer associates were able to create a more individualized experience for themselves. Throughout the program, we were mindful of the mantra of "working, learning, connecting" as we worked to keep everyone engaged and motivated. We wanted associates to be able to take control of their schedules, so that they got the most from opportunities like training sessions, mentoring, and assignments. To help them, we added an additional program that addressed effective time management in a virtual world. The agenda focused on setting a schedule, sticking to a routine, and being accountable in the absence of a supervisor. We also offered a program that taught effective communication when using a screen-based program. And, importantly, we addressed the risks of "imposter syndrome," which can be a real problem in a virtual environment when anxiety and isolation can result in individuals beginning to doubt their abilities.

Inclusion

The pandemic has resulted in a growing sense of isolation for many people, and we have focused

on maintaining connectivity among our attorneys and business services professionals. During the program, summer associates received all our firmwide internal communications, were featured on the firm's weekly community page, were invited to attend firmwide town halls, participated in initiatives run by specific departments and practices, took part in the firm's Virtual Duathlon, and were involved in other activities designed to bring people together. The firm also hosted numerous virtual social events, which were critical in creating opportunities for summer associates and attorneys to have fun and get to know each other outside of work. We also emphasize the firm's various health and wellness resources. Before they started the program, summer associates were invited to participate in the firm's annual fit club—virtually, of course—and had access to resources provided by our wellness providers. They also participated in information sessions with a nutritionist and a health coach, who spoke about the importance of maintaining a routine and healthy eating when in quarantine.

During the summer, as Black Lives Matter protests spread across the country, the legal community's commitment to diversity became increasingly salient to summer associates. The firm launched a number of initiatives, including a firmwide fundraiser to support racial justice organizations and a program on how to address systemic racism and unconscious bias and how to be an effective ally. Many of the summer associates said they were appreciative of the firm's transparency and willingness to have these conversations, and enjoyed participating in discussions about solutions.

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With the possibility of a return to workplace normalcy looking increasingly hopeful, we are determined to take the lessons we learned from the summer of 2020 and use them to inform our programming, recruiting, and mentoring for the new generations of lawyers. The most important lesson we have learned is the critical role the firm's culture plays in supporting real connectivity. When in-person gatherings are not possible, being able to successfully communicate the ethos and goals of the organization relies on the dedication, enthusiasm, and commitment of the partners, attorneys, and business services professionals. We are committed to ensuring that the closeness and sense of community achieved during the summer program continues. In the post-pandemic world, we must remain adaptable, flexible, and passionate about the work we do for our clients. This means attracting, training, and retaining talented people who want to practice law and relish the prospect of being part of a cohesive organization. The message we hope our summer associates will always remember is that, occasionally, we may feel we're on our own, but as part of a team, we are never alone.

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