

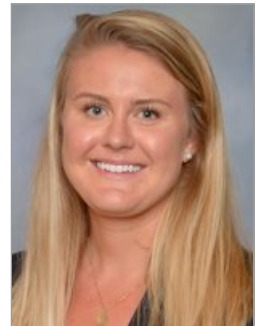
What I Learned As A Virtual Summer Associate

By **Kelley Sheehan** (August 12, 2020, 3:45 PM EDT)

I am a second-year law student at the University of San Diego School of Law, and I'm eager to share my experience as a virtual summer associate during the COVID-19.

The first year of law school was a whirlwind, marked by a global pandemic with completely remote classes and finals, as well as a pass/fail grading system. But perhaps most important to any young law student, the pandemic put the opportunity to work as a summer associate at a law firm at risk.

Unlike many of my classmates whose summer programs were canceled, I was able to complete my summer program at Patterson & Sheridan LLP as a virtual member of the firm's San Diego office, despite the unprecedented circumstances.



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Entering the program as a rising 2L, I had no prior summer experience for comparison. This would be my first exposure to a career in law and likewise my first exposure to patents, so I was unsure of what to expect. I anticipated meeting and working with a variety of people, learning about the intellectual property law field, and getting to know a group of law students from various backgrounds interested in the same profession.

My expectations were exceeded. While the online format did pose some challenges, overall, the program was an extremely valuable experience. Looking back, I was able to work with many different attorneys on different projects, exposing me to a broad range of issues and workflows in a short period of time. Daily contact with the recruiting team or a mentor helped to ensure I was always busy and felt included in the firm.

Projects were assigned by mentors and other attorneys who worked in areas of interest to each summer associate. Toward the beginning of the program, mentors and the recruiting team elicited feedback on what types of clients we were interested in working with and passed this information along to the rest of the firm. Each summer associate brought a different background and skill set, so projects would often be assigned with our expertise and area of interest in mind.

For me, this included everything from work related to medical devices and pharmaceuticals, which I am more familiar with, to software, which required some background research to fully understand. My work mostly included prior art research for applications, reviewing and drafting office action responses, and some research projects mixed in. I even had the opportunity to assist in drafting a patent, which was an extremely valuable experience. To the best of my knowledge, these projects were fairly similar to what would have been assigned in an in-person program.

I understand the social aspect of a summer program is important to get to know the firm, attorneys and other summer associates. While COVID-19 impacted the ability to travel for in-person meetings or even get together locally, the weekly virtual social hours with attorneys in other offices provided a level of interaction that may not have been possible with an in-office program. This also afforded me the opportunity to interact with the engineering interns, a group of undergraduate students hosted by the firm for the summer to provide early exposure to intellectual property law.

The weekly social hours had something for everyone, from a virtual paint night to a bingo

tournament, and even a videoconferenced movie viewing of "Top Gun," complete with popcorn sent by the firm. My personal favorites were a virtual magic show and a murder mystery, where each summer associate channeled their acting abilities as a different character.

Not only were the events creative and fun, but also a good way to get to know attorneys you would not otherwise work with, in a more relaxed, albeit homebound, setting. Utilizing technology to connect offices across the country may create a new paradigm to implement in an in-person summer program.

In regard to the work experience, I quickly realized it was necessary to be more independent than would be required in an in-office summer associate program. In office, you can visit partners' and associates' offices for quick advice and discussions, whereas in the virtual environment, you are challenged to think twice about asking for answers to a question you may be able to answer yourself.

However, there is a balance between judging when there is a question you can tackle yourself and when you should ask for guidance to avoid time spent researching to no avail. While researching requires more time and self-determination, it mimics more of what it will be like as a first-year associate when there are higher expectations of independence.

The independence also encourages you to use your resources and seek out feedback from other summer associates. All of the summer associates were in the same position, and it was often helpful to reach out to them as a resource throughout the process, as often they have already learned potential processes and solutions.

Another benefit of a virtual program is the opportunity to take initiative in managing your workload. Keeping tabs on projects and asking for more projects ahead of time ensure attorneys have ample time to review their docket and assign a new project while you are still busy. Verbalizing when you need more work is important to success in a summer associate program, and as future first-year attorneys.

A challenge of the virtual program is the lack of in-person connections with which to elicit more casual feedback. As many of the tasks you are facing are the first exposure you have had, it is important to set up meetings after assignments to discuss areas where you excelled and any challenges you faced to allow you to improve the process in the future.

So, in some ways the more scheduled and structured aspect of a virtual summer internship helped to instill habits that I believe will be useful as a full-time associate at a firm. In my experience, being purposeful in asking for and receiving feedback helped me gain more experience and become more confident in my work.

In a virtual experience, you get what you put in. It is easy to complete the summer and not interact with the attorneys you're not assigned to assist. It is your responsibility to be intentional about reaching out and getting to know attorneys, perhaps via virtual lunch or coffee. Thinking of it as conversation you would have in passing in the office, in the break room or while getting morning coffee is a good way to approach it.

In case it is necessary to create a successful virtual summer associate program in the future, I would like to share a few tips from the summer associate perspective.

First, it is beneficial to ensure summer associates have multiple avenues to get in touch with attorney mentors and attorneys who work in a field of interest. Not only will this allow exposure to different projects and working styles, but it will ensure the summer associates stay busy and feel like they are getting to know the firm, even from home. In my experience, my ability to connect with different attorneys and work on different projects was key to the success of the program.

Second, adding virtual social hours are important for the opportunity to meet members of other offices and build a relationship with other summer associates. As I would have been based in San Diego the majority of the summer, the weekly social hours provided more time to meet with other attorneys than I would have had in an in-person program. In this way, I think virtual social hours to connect offices across the country would be beneficial to keep, regardless of whether the program resumes in person next summer.

Overall, the remote summer program was very memorable and unique. While the remote approach generated some challenges, it also taught independence and confidence, which are crucial for success as you strive to be a successful future associate.

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