Making the Most of Your Public Interest Summer

A. Establish Relationships With Your Supervisor(s), Other Interns, Attorneys and Paralegals in the Organization.

Your Supervisor

Although there may be a variety of reasons you are working with an organization for the summer, a key goal for a summer job is to continue your training as a lawyer. Thus, you will want to make sure you are getting the supervision you need. This can sometimes be difficult as public sector attorneys are busy and may not have had as much experience supervising interns. You need to be persistent and solicit specific and regular feedback from your supervisor.

Other Interns

It’s always nice to have a comrade in arms through whom you can test ideas and experiences. Your fellow interns can help to make a somewhat stressful experience much more bearable. Additionally, you will gain new people with whom to network as you continue your job search.

Paralegals

In most public interest organizations paralegals and legal assistants are some of the most experienced and knowledgeable people in the office, and worth getting to know. In some organizations a senior paralegal may even be your supervisor for a case or series of projects.

Other Attorneys in the Organization

Although you may have one main supervisor, it is important to get to know other attorneys in your organization. You can set up meetings with attorneys doing work that is interesting to you and expand your career-related network.

B. Have Clear Goals and Arrange to Experience What You Can While at the Organization.

Know what you want to get out of your summer experience before you begin. Take advantage of what the organization has to offer in terms of the work it does: individual cases, impact litigation, brief writing, legislative efforts, etc.

Arrange to attend meetings related to your interests, such as case review meetings, task force meetings, and unit or coalition meetings. If someone is going to trial, or arguing a case in appeals court, ask to attend. Broaden your experience and exposure to different issues and ideas by taking advantage of the training programs and seminars that your organization offers.

C. Network in the Public Interest Community.

Take the opportunity to attend any networking events held in your area. Local bar associations and other organizations, such as the National Lawyers Guild, will often hold public sector related networking events. If your organization is involved with local or national associations (e.g., the National Association of Attorneys General), make it known that you are willing to attend their events. Use these opportunities to meet with attorneys doing the type of work in which you are interested. You may find that these contacts are useful when you are looking for your next public sector job.

D. Be Someone the Organization Would Want to Hire as a Permanent Employee.
Organizations are looking for students who are talented, hardworking, interested in what the organization does, intellectually curious, service-oriented, committed to public interest over the long term, imaginative and tenacious, and able to work well with clients. You will need to find ways to show these qualities to your supervisor and the other people with whom you work.

Contribute in meetings. Ask probing questions when given an assignment or when meeting with your supervisor. Produce work that is high quality and that makes an impression. Volunteer to work on special projects or extra, more difficult cases. Make sure the organization knows you are willing to do whatever needs to be done. You will begin to be seen as someone the organization can turn to when a case or project comes up.

E. Be Prepared for the Realities of a Public Interest Practice.

Many public sector organizations run on tight budgets and must work with fewer resources. Be careful about how you use services such as LEXIS and Westlaw, and make sure you know how much research time can be spent online. This is especially true for public interest organizations that can often only afford LEXIS or Westlaw when there is no other way to get the information or case. Some organizations may ask you to use your law school account to do research. Talk to your LEXIS or Westlaw representatives to find out if they will let you use your account for work with a nonprofit organization.

Support staff may not fully exist in some organizations. Thus, you may be handling your own typing, copying, appointments, phone calls, etc. You need to be as flexible as possible in these situations.

F. Leave with Writing Samples and Potential Recommendations.

When you are looking for public sector employment in your second and third years, you will need to have a good, solid writing sample to present to potential employers. Most potential employers will expect you to have produced something during your summer job that shows your ability to write outside a classroom setting. Speak to your supervisor about using your work product as a writing sample. Make sure you have a copy of a piece of YOUR writing that is in useable shape before you leave the organization.

Additionally, recommendations within the public interest community have great credibility. Good references from other public interest practitioners, both on the local and national scene, can go a long way in any job search.

G. Keep Career Planning and Professionalism’s Phone Number and Email Address Handy.

CP&P doesn’t close up shop for the summer, and we will be happy to answer your questions or talk you through a situation if you need it. We can also help you to structure your future job search and give you ideas about how to make the most of your summer. You can reach Neta Borshansky, Associate Director for Public Sector Careers and Director of Government Programs at nborshan@law.upenn.edu or at 215-898-3086.