Why Am I Being Treated So Harshly as a Summer Associate?

Question: I am a summer at one of the top N.Y. law firms which is doing well despite the economy, and I go to a top 10 law school.

I worked for six years prior to law school, and I have to say that I am shocked at how we are being treated as summers. We frequently work all weekend, and until midnight during the week.

If we try to miss a social event to finish our work, we are chastised.

The partners routinely tell us how good we have it as summers, doing nothing but going out for expensive lunches. Then we get bad reviews: They don’t like our work, they don’t like us personally.

It’s like we can’t win! We’re all terrified that we won’t get offers (the firm ended up with more summers than they wanted), but equally terrified at the thought of returning. If this is what being a summer is like, what will it be like to be an associate?

See the following articles for more information:
- Top 10 Reasons Why Getting a Summer Associate Job With a Large Law Firm is Crucial to Your Legal Career
- Tips for Being a Successful Summer Associate

Talking with summers at other firms, it doesn’t seem like it’s this bad everywhere. It seems unlikely, but is there anything we can do to turn the summer around? At least to plead for some time off to fulfill our law review commitments? When we re-interview, how can we address questions about why we’re re-interviewing, and possibly why so many of us from the same firm are re-interviewing?

See the following articles for more information:
- Top 7 Tips for Succeeding as a First Year Associate: How to Succeed as a New Associate in a Law Firm
- Success as a First-Year Associate: Up and Away

Answer: Why am I having such a difficult time trying to summon up sympathy for you? You did mention that your summer employer is doing well despite the economy. So many other firms are not doing as well and the summer classes are smaller than they have been in years. I suspect that there are a number of 2Ls out there who would gladly trade their unemployed status with your rough life.
What exactly did you expect? You are shocked that you frequently work all weekend? What did you think you were going to do all summer - sip cocktails and go to baseball games? You are upset because sometimes you are still in the office until midnight? I know that you aren’t going to tell me that the summer associates are the only people working at midnight or on the weekends. I’ll bet that there are associates and partners that are putting in the same hours that you are being subjected to - or longer.

You have complained that if you miss a social event because you are working on an assignment then you are chastised. Have you discussed this with the partner in charge of summer associates? Exactly what kind of assignments are you being given that cannot be finished in time for a social event? Either you are being given too many assignments or you simply cannot keep up with the work that has been assigned to you. In either event, you need to sit down with the partner who is supervising the summer associate program and straighten this out.

I know that I am being rough on you, but you really need to work out this whole situation. The worst thing that can happen to you this summer is to not secure an offer of employment for when you graduate from law school. You are a guest at this law firm during the summer and you need to act like one. Whatever is asked of you, you must respond in a manner that shows you are up to the task. You are correct when you say that it is unlikely that you will be able to turn things around. Who are you to tell this firm what they are doing is wrong (in your opinion)? Remember, you are their guest this summer. And you are receiving a healthy paycheck to boot. You will have your chance to express your displeasure once you receive an offer from the firm and you turn them down. Actions do speak louder than words. In the meantime, you need to make sure that you are going to receive that offer.

By the way (and unfortunately for you), the law firm is not really concerned with your law review commitments. This is yet another responsibility that you have taken on and you must somehow find the time to fulfill your obligations.

"Re-interviewing" is not a problem at all when you have an offer from a prestigious law firm to begin with. It is not so unusual for someone to speak with other firms before deciding to accept an offer from a summer employer. As far as wondering what to say when so many associates from the same firm are out there interviewing - well, I don’t think you would have to say anything. It would seem to be fairly obvious if there are large numbers of summer associates from the same law firm out interviewing with other firms. You needn’t concern yourself with these other people. Just be concerned about yourself.

You asked that since the summer is so awful, what would full-time employment be like? Probably much of the same and then much more challenging. Life as an attorney in a major law firm is not an easy life. It is demanding and in many ways, your life is no longer your own. If you are having a difficult time as a summer associate then you had better think through if the large law firm life is for you after graduation. If you are thinking more along the lines of a nine to six workday and free weekends, do not even consider going to work for a big law firm.

I am sorry that you are having such an unpleasant summer. This is not what you should be experiencing. I do urge you to sit down with the partner in charge of summer associates and try to work things out. Be careful how you phrase your discontent. Remember, you want to be well liked enough to be given an offer of full-time employment. You might also want to try to sit down and analyze what is really going on. Is there any way that you can figure out how to work with this firm’s system? You should try hard to do this because I do not believe that you will have much luck trying to change the way the firm conducts their program.

Just remember, as bad as it all seems right now, it could be much worse if you had no summer job at all. I hope it all works out for you.