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SUMMER ASSOCIATES *Outlook*

Choosing Your Niche

Use the summer experience to help determine and shape your destiny

By Janet Greenberg

Asking a law student what type of law he or she wants to practice is often like a high school guidance counselor asking a freshman what he or she wants to major in at college. Some may have an idea of what they might like to do, but most, in fact, have no clue. Law students can use their summer associate experience to gain some clarity as to what the future may hold for them.

For those “undecided” students, they should first do some homework to make sure they choose the right firm. Ask smart questions at career nights, job fairs and through the actual interview process. Ask your law school’s career services office what they know about the firms you are considering. Does the firm offer a variety of assignments and exposure to different practice

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areas? Will you have the opportunity to go to court? Will you interact with clients? Will you be stuck in the library doing research all day? Does the firm offer training programs? What do they teach you? Do you ultimately have any input as to what practice area you will work in if and when the job offer comes? The list of questions is virtually endless. The important thing is to be able to ascertain if the few months at a particular firm will help you gain a better understanding of different areas of law and what may be best for you.

Not only is it important that the firm offers the things you seek, but it is equally important that you know enough about yourself to understand what you may be seeking. Generally speaking, different personality types are better suited for different kinds of firms and specific areas of law. In addition to personality, the same can be said of an individual’s interests, skill set, strengths and weaknesses. A shy person may not be happiest going to court. A “people person” might be miserable doing SEC work. A creative person may be good at putting corporate deals together. A mover and shaker might excel at a fast-paced entertainment law practice. A compassionate person might like elder law.

As you can see, different people can find differing areas of law that best fit and suit them. During the summer program, observe what types of people practice in what areas of law. Also observe if they seem happy or not. Where do you see yourself best fitting in? Try not to fall victim to the trap of ending up practicing in a particular area because that is where the firm had an opening. Try shaping your own destiny.

As far as skills go, everybody is different. Some people are organized, some can write well, some are excellent oral communicators, some are highly intelligent in science, and so on. Take stock in what your particular strengths and weaknesses are. Be brutally honest with yourself. During the summer, attempt to do a self-analysis of your strengths and weaknesses. Sharpen your skills and attempt to improve weak areas. Ask the attorneys who give you assignments to give you feedback — both positive and negative. Ask for tips on how to improve. Hopefully, you will learn what you are good at, while at the same time, begin to understand the type of work you might like to do. Again, use these experiences to help determine and then shape your destiny.

Your assessment of your strengths, weaknesses, interests, skills and personality should factor in to a great extent when determining what type of law you want to practice and what you might be good at. More importantly, it may make

all the difference in determining if you will be a successful and satisfied attorney. Going against one's personality and internal makeup is a definite recipe for unhappiness.

The practice of law you ultimately choose can also have a great impact on your lifestyle, or can keep you from achieving the lifestyle you desire. What are your priorities? Is your private time important to you? What sacrifices are you willing or not willing to make? If you want to be a real estate or land use attorney, you may be required to attend hearings at night when local zoning boards meet. A mergers and acquisitions attorney may spend days and nights trying to get deals closed. An employment attorney may be required to work 9 to 5 so he is available to address the concerns of corporate human resources managers. A law student will not know how a particular practice area can potentially affect his life until he gets some exposure to it. Use the time over the summer to learn more. If you're interested in land use, ask the land use attorneys how often they go to nighttime hearings. Make your own observations; ask to tag along to the hearings so you can actually see what takes place.

A huge impact on your quality of life will be the culture of the firm. Your firm may be a fine place to spend most of your waking hours, or it may be an incredibly miserable one. You will not be able to determine if a firm is right for you until you actually live it. The firm is evaluating you over the summer, but you

should also be evaluating the firm. Are the people generally happy and collegial with one another? Is there low morale, high turnover, etc.? Use the summer to ask the younger attorneys, especially those who came through the firm's summer program, how they view the firm. Firm recruiting materials and interviewers all basically sound the same. Does your summer experience actually mimic the recruiting materials? Sometimes, individual firm practice areas can have their own unique subcultures. What is the culture of the practice area you are leaning towards? Are the department leaders reasonable? Is the department team-orientated or appear to be a collection of individuals doing their own thing? Do they mentor younger attorneys? Look, listen and learn.

The summer experience can also be an excellent forum to learn about the legal industry and marketplace in general. That's right, it is an industry. Maybe in the past, the law was a noble profession where the singular goal was to ensure justice. Today, a law firm lives in an ultra-competitive environment, fighting for clients and talented attorneys to service their clients. During the summer, get your hands on copies of the firm's local and national legal publications. Try to learn what trends are taking place in the industry. What practice areas are hot? What practice areas will continue to be hot? What factors are working to create change and opportunity? The more you know about the industry, the better idea you will have about what you want to do,

what is lucrative, and what is exciting.

The message this article is attempting to convey is that your summer associate program should not only be about chasing a job. Clearly getting a job is important, as there are loans and bills to pay. However, it should be used as a compliment to your overall legal education. You have three months to see what a practicing attorney does on a daily basis. Try to absorb as much as you can on both a technical level (researching, writing, communicating) and a practical level (firm culture, firm politics, firm procedures, management, client service, marketing, networking, finding mentors, etc.).

Sadly, job dissatisfaction is high among attorneys. This is caused by a number of factors, such as stress, pressure, competition, lack of control, boredom, and the daily dealings with nasty clients and co-workers. One huge factor is that many attorneys do not like the work they do and often feel trapped in their area of expertise. There are never guarantees the decisions you make today will make you a happy and successful person tomorrow. However, you can control what happens to you and you can greatly increase your odds for obtaining success and satisfaction. Working at a law firm during the summer will give you countless opportunities and real-life data to help gain a clearer picture of what may bring you happiness and success, and also get you closer to knowing what you want to do with the rest of your life. ■