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The Real World According to Summer Associates

Summer associates of 2006 wonder what life will be like when the party's over

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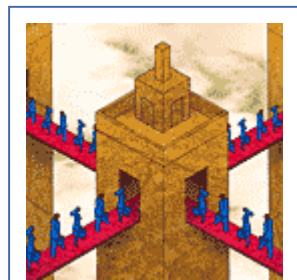


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Law students today are a serious bunch. "Although I appreciate the fancy lunches, dinners, ball games, retreats, etc., I am more interested in experiencing what life actually will be like as a first-year associate," reads one typical remark from an intern at Heller Ehrman in Menlo Park, Calif. "Make sure summer associates have enough work to do -- most of us would rather stay late than spend days bored," counseled a Cahill Gordon & Reindel summer associate. They may welcome -- and even expect -- the fun and games, but they know that all the pampering goes by the wayside once they sign on as a permanent associate.

Partners and administrators involved in the recruitment process say that this need-to-know approach is coming from a couple of places. Summer clerks today are much more knowledgeable consumers. "Five or six years ago, summer associates would ask questions like, 'How many lawyers do you have?' or, 'What are your practice areas?'" says Jennifer Gotch, director of recruiting at Atlanta's Arnall Golden Gregory. "You never hear that anymore." Instead, summer clerks are digging deeper, asking firms to open up their books, discuss their strategic plans, and describe their partnership track -- in detail.

There's also a generational difference. These aspiring lawyers want to have a life, too. "They're really looking for a balance -- they're not interested in the churn-and-burn," Gotch says. Summers want to know about alternative work arrangements, such as part-time work and telecommuting, and the firm's family-friendliness, including child care facilities and paternity leaves. "Work-life balance is not some faddish buzzword, but a pending crisis that will, eventually, affect your firm's prosperity and longevity," warned a clerk at Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft.

Some firms looked better than others under the microscope. The 172 firms in the survey averaged a rating of 4.502 on a scale of 1 to 5. The highest-scoring firms included many familiar names -- 10 of the 20 best firms of 2006 scored in the top 20 last year as well, including this year's winner, Arnall Golden Gregory. But plenty of newcomers grabbed top slots, including second-place winner Nutter McClennen & Fish (up from No. 41 in 2005), and third-place Gunderson Dettmer Stough Villeneuve Franklin & Hachigian (up from No. 37 in 2005). Two of the top 10 slots were captured by firms that vaulted more than 100 spots: Dickstein Shapiro leaped from 119th to sixth, and Morgan, Lewis & Bockius shot from 122th to seventh.

For the most part, summer associates eager to get a taste of the real thing were not disappointed. Work events to remember included the usual -- seats at the deal table, one-on-ones with clients, going to court, writing parts of a brief -- and the unusual. One Hunton & Williams summer associate went to Tanzania on business; summers at White & Case, which is known for its international practice, worked in the firm's Mexico City, Hong Kong, and Paris offices. An Arnold & Porter summer intern worked as part of the appeals team for convicted Sept. 11 terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui. Other memorable pro bono projects involved visiting prison to interview clients and helping with an adoption at which all seven children showed up for the hearing -- "Fantastic!" said the Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher summer who participated.

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As for quantity, comments were about evenly split between too much and too little work. (Survey results showed that, on average, summers put in 45.3 hours per week.) "If possible, give summer associates more work and responsibility even if it means that the summer associate may have to work late from time to time. A little dose of reality should not be too much to cope [with]," said a clerk at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, already sounding like a partner.

Keeping it real helped propel firms like third-ranked Gunderson Dettmer to the top of the heap. "This class got really great work," says partner Anthony McCusker. "When they walked out the door at the end of the summer, they knew what it was like as an associate here." At other firms, things sometimes got too authentic. "Keep summers away from the horrendous partners that are hard to work with and make people cry," whimpered one summer at fifth-ranked Cozen O'Connor. A clerk at 156th-ranked Cadwalader grumbled about the "torture of working for an associate who is notoriously awful to work with." Apparently, there's reality, and there's reality, summer-style.

That said, on the whole, summers came off as a pretty tough crew. They welcomed brutal honesty. "Ride the associates and partners to give the summers real feedback on their work," urged a clerk at Linklaters, voicing a commonly heard complaint. "I feel like I just got the 'yeah, whatever, everyone likes you' generic feedback evaluation." Even clerks whose work got ripped apart seemed appreciative. A summer at Cravath, Swaine & Moore relates what happened to her first piece of legal writing, "a 40-word letter to a court requesting to make a photocopy. I got it back from the associate who reviewed it, and 37 of the words had been changed. Thirty-seven. Seriously. ... These people don't mess around." She was looking forward to more of the same, giving the firm almost perfect scores across the board and saying she'd probably accept its offer for a permanent position.

As always, clerks had plenty of opportunities to party away any unpleasant work encounters. Summer associates sampled from the usual smorgasbord of activities: wine tastings, cooking classes, Broadway shows, luxury boxes at baseball games, sea kayaking, trapeze camp and the ever popular citywide scavenger hunts. Clerks spent quality time with U.S. Supreme Court justices, members of Congress and other government figures. They heard Madonna, Sheryl Crow, Jimmy Buffett and the Dave Matthews Band in concert. Smith, Gambrell & Russell clerks spent a weekend in the Bahamas, and Heller Ehrman clerks hiked up Half Dome in Yosemite. More offbeat events ranged from Proskauer Rose's hot dog eating contest to Bryan Cave's outing to a Phoenix restaurant that served insects (water bugs, crickets, ants and worms).

No firm was exempt from suggestions for improvement -- many of which were diametrically opposed. "Flip-flops all week long," suggested a Morgan, Lewis & Bockius summer. "Require a coat and tie every day," a Faegre & Benson clerk grumbled. "Better air-conditioning," recommended a sweaty Hunton & Williams summer. "Turn down the air-conditioning. It is freezing!" shivered a Sidley Austin clerk. Nothing was sacred, including the firm's name. "Keep Lardner in the name," advised a Foley & Lardner intern. "Make the name shorter," a summer at DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary suggested. (Evidently following this advice, the firm became DLA Piper in September.) Even interns in the same office could be found on opposite sides of an issue. "This particular office is in need of a minority partner," said an African-American clerk at Foley & Lardner. "[Don't] limit the quality of candidates just to achieve diversification," said another clerk in the same office, a white male. For every chair that fit a summer just right, there was another for whom it was too big or too small.

Still, summer programs come about as close as humanly possible to pleasing everyone. Even the bottom-ranked firms, Wildman, Harrold, Allen & Dixon and Brown Rudnick Berlack Israels, scored a 4.100 on a scale of 1 to 5. (Neither firms responded to requests for comment.) Despite the narrow spread, there's remarkable consistency year after year in the top ranks, suggesting that as good as the programs are overall, some programs are simply better.

Case in point: this year's winner, Arnall Golden. The firm kept up the good work of previous years to capture this year's gold; up from 15th in 2005 and repeating its first-place showing of 2001. Recruiting director Gotch attributes the program's success to its small size. "Our theme is quality over quantity," says Gotch. With just 10 summer associates in a firm of 130 lawyers, "it allows us to personalize each student's summer experience," she says. The small class ensures that all summers get high-quality projects, she says. Clerks agreed: Arnall Golden was the only nationally ranked firm in the survey to receive perfect scores for both interesting work and real work. The high ratio of lawyers to summers also meant that clerks were lavished with attention, which was reflected in the perfect fives they awarded for the level of interaction with both partners and full-time associates.

But a big summer class is hardly a deal breaker. Morgan Lewis managed to rise to No. 7, despite having more than 100 summer clerks. Eric Kraeutler, firmwide hiring partner, says that over the past couple of years, the firm has revamped its summer program to improve training, transparency and pro bono opportunities. It also allows interns to split their time between the firm and a public service organization, which about a quarter of the summers do.

At some firms, the summer program seems to have benefited from a trickle-down effect: Satisfied associates mean satisfied summer associates. Boston's Nutter McClennen, the second-place finisher, has also ranked among the top five firms in the country in *The American Lawyer's* annual survey of midlevel associates for two years in a row. "The fact that our associates are so darn happy is something that we want summer associates to appreciate," says hiring committee head Alexander Glovsky. Summers apparently did, describing the midsize general practice firm as "the best-kept secret in Boston."

Dickstein Shapiro is another top 10 firm that has seen how happy permanent associates boost the summer experience. The firm jumped 113 spots in the ranks this year, from 119th to sixth. Patrick Lynch, the firm's hiring partner, says no huge changes were made to the summer program, other than to expand professional development and training. But in last year's *American Lawyer Associates Survey*, Dickstein jumped from 133th to fifth, following a renewed across-the-board commitment to associate satisfaction

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that increased salaries, upped the pro bono allowance, revamped the mentoring program, and gave associates a voice in firm matters. Since summers today are so focused on what it would be like to be a permanent associate, "if your full-time associates are happy, summers are going to notice," Lynch says.

Overall, leaders outscored laggards in three areas in particular: training, communicating goals and expectations, and partner interaction. Echoing Cool Hand Luke, many summers at bottom-ranked firms complained about a failure to communicate, by firms and individual lawyers alike. "Level with us a little more," said a summer at seventh-from-last Morrison & Foerster. "I ... never knew exactly what was expected of us, since it seemed to vary so much by practice area and work coordinator. Tell us: How much work should we be doing? Will we be penalized for doing too much, or too little?" ("We will certainly take the comment to heart," says MoFo chair Keith Wetmore. "The message to any given summer associate may differ at different points during their summer experience.")

But for the most part, law students gave their summer employers high praise. "I was struck by how genuinely happy and friendly all the attorneys were, from first-year associates to partners," said one starry-eyed summer in Gibson Dunn's New York office. "You always hear horror stories [about] New York firms, but Gibson didn't get the memo about making lawyers' lives miserable." Not many other firms did, either, according to their summer clerks. Here's hoping that memo stays lost even after they start their permanent jobs.

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