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Is Half of a Summer Associate Better Than None?

In a good job market, more law students press firms to allow splitting of summer jobs

Leigh Jones
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Fewer law students and a brisk legal market mean that more law firms may need to start sharing their summer associates.

Depending on the part of the country, many law firms historically have been reluctant to allow law students to split their summer jobs between two law firms. And firms that do permit split summers often insist that students spend the first half of the season at their shops.

But job-placement professionals say that market forces are prompting firms to rethink their policies in order to get top students through their doors -- if only for a few weeks.

"The smart ones are accommodating the students," said Marina Sirras, president of the National Association of Legal Search Consultants.

Some 669 law firms among the 1,723 listed in the directory of the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) allow students to split their summers. Many firms permit their summer associates to work the second half with a public-interest organization.

But an increasing number, especially in Northern California, are allowing two-firm splits, said Lisa Dickinson, president of NALP.

She said that summer splits have not been common in the San Francisco area, but that the market is changing.

"It's been a trend that never truly caught on in Northern California, but I do hear that firms are more and more saying they'll do it for the first half," Dickinson said.

Elsewhere, splits have been more common. Miller, Canfield, Paddock and Stone's hiring partner Deborah Thompson said that although split summers are not the Detroit-based firm's "favorite thing in the world," the 350-attorney law firm is "really quite flexible" in permitting students to join the firm during the first half or the second half of the summer. "We're not afraid to let them split," she said.

Basic supply and demand means that more firms could assume Miller Canfield's attitude. Last year, law school applications dropped for the first time since 1997. Some 4.6 percent fewer people applied to law schools in 2005, according to the Law School Admission Council.

At the same time, on-campus recruiting for fall 2005 went up, according to NALP, which found that half of the law schools nationwide reported an increase of 5 percent or more in the number of employers on campus.

In addition, revenues among the nation's 100 highest-grossing law firms hit a combined \$51 billion in 2005, an 11 percent increase from 2004, according to *The American Lawyer*, an affiliate of *The National Law Journal*.



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Susan Robinson, Stanford Law School's associate dean for career services, said that the strength of the market dictates how accommodating law firms are to summer splits. She added, however, that firms can be stubborn about requiring students to spend the first half with them.

Law firms often insist on the first half for a variety of reasons, Robinson said. Summer associate programs have become increasingly structured in recent years, with more firms implementing rigid starting dates and ending dates. Permitting students to come in halfway through can disrupt the flow of these programs and leave newcomers feeling alienated from other summer associates who have already bonded with each other, she said.

BEST ASSIGNMENTS

In addition, law firms tend to dole out the best assignments to summer associates at the beginning of the summer. The well of meaningful tasks tends to run dry during the second half, Robinson said.

The concern among law firms is that summer associates who join firms in the second half may have an inferior experience, which makes them less willing to sign with the firm once they graduate.

Washington's Steptoe & Johnson is sticking to its policy of refusing to hire students who want to spend the second half of the season with the firm, said Rosemary Kelly Morgan, director of attorney services and recruiting for the 412-attorney firm.

"It's very hard to say no, but we think we make a better impression in the beginning of the summer," she said.