

Inside Out > column



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Positioning for success

Here's another installment of Inside Out with law firm partner Christina Martini and in-house counsel David Susler. They are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married. Watch them talk more about this topic with the Better Government Association's Andy Shaw at ChicagoLawyerMagazine.com.

What advice would you give law students today that's different from five years ago?

Martini: The legal profession and market have undergone dramatic transformation over the past five years, the likes of which we have never seen before.

The rules of the game continue to evolve. It is important for students to understand and accept this perpetual state of change before investing significant money and time in a law school education. There is also a level of determination, maturity, business savvy and sophistication that is essential for the next generation of lawyers.

I recommend that law students actively seek ways to ensure they are effectively positioning themselves for success and to be very clear about what they hope to accomplish with a law degree. Taking time to gain work experience between college and law school is one way to ensure that a career in the law is what they really want.

Susler: Given the much tougher job market since 2008, law students must alter their expectations regarding job prospects during and especially after school. My advice is that students need to start their job search almost immediately after starting school.

That doesn't mean they should apply for jobs right away, but rather build the foundation to find them for the summers and during their 2L and 3L years.

That means network — go to law firm and

bar association programs and events. And meet lawyers while there.

Don't rely on OCI for summer or permanent jobs. Consider other job options — for example, smaller firms, not-for-profits and government agencies.

What's the most valuable thing you learned in law school that you still use in your practice today?

Martini: There are a few important lessons I learned. Law school in many ways is like learning a foreign language, and practicing law is much the same experience — developing your stamina and learning by immersion.

To be a strong performer in any endeavor, you need to jump in head first, focus and relentlessly work toward your goal.

Law school also teaches a rigor to one's thought process and problem-solving — much like engineering school did for me. It is an invaluable tool, not just in the practice of law but in life. I also learned that every issue has more than one answer or legitimate point of view.

This is important, not only in advocating for clients but also when approaching leadership and decision-making, both within and outside the law.

Susler: Considering substantive courses. This is tough because my focus in law school was so different than it is today.

I planned on being a personal-injury attorney and there were few courses directly relevant to such a career beyond torts, evidence and trial advocacy. When I went in-house, my focus shifted to a business-commercial practice.

The one substantive thing I learned in law school that is even more valuable today than earlier in my career is bankruptcy. I always advise law students that they should take this

class, as bankruptcy touches everything, no matter your practice area.

Do you see more companies starting summer internships for law school students?

Susler: Yes. Although starting in-house straight from law school remains rare, the interest in practicing in-house as a career goal has increased considerably in recent years, as have the number of in-house summer internships.

Such programs are a good introduction to in-house practice, provide hands-on practical experience and experience working with "the client."

They can also provide excellent networking opportunities which, as I said earlier, are critical for law students these days.

How are summer associate programs different today than 10 years ago?

Martini: The current mindset regarding summer programs is very different. They are generally more conservative and more focused on specific practice group needs and on ensuring the summer associate is a good long-term fit with the firm.

These programs are not as much about entertainment and selling the summer associate on the firm as before.

Law firms invest a lot of time and money on law school recruiting. Since all businesses are trying to do more with less, these programs are leaner, more focused and more competitive. Some firms have made the decision that summer programs no longer align with their workforce needs and have decided to phase them out completely.

As this phenomenon continues, law students will be forced to be more creative and strategic in finding ways to get the experience they need upon graduation. ■

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