

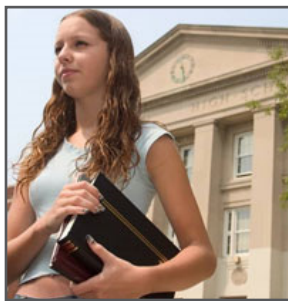


Feature

## Summer Positions with Small Firms and Public Interest Groups

By Anayat Durrani

With summer just around the corner, law students are working hard to ensure they secure employment at a firm. While some may choose to work at large law firms, most choose to spend their summers working at small firms or for public interest groups.



When hiring, employers look for certain criteria from interested law students.

"We look for a strong combination of academic excellence, interesting life experiences, and personality," said Amy Solomon of the law firm of Girardi and Keese. "Most of our summer clerk positions are filled through on-campus interviews we

conduct at the larger local law schools."

Finding summer jobs at smaller law firms or with public interest groups can be done through law school career centers as well as through campus recruiters.

"Most of our 2Ls either go with private firms that interview here on campus in the fall of second year or public service employers that either interview here—only a few do—or that the 2Ls contact on their own," said Steve Hopson, Senior Assistant Dean for Career Services, University of Virginia School of Law. "Some smaller firms, especially from Virginia, are on-campus interviewers and are able to get people that way. However, while these may be smaller on the national scene, they are mostly very major players locally."

Hopson said most other small firms do not usually hire for the next summer when they conduct on-grounds interviews in the fall, but they participate in a statewide job fair in the spring for small firms and those 2Ls still in the market.

"A disadvantage of the smaller firm is that what most students are looking for in private sector jobs are permanent offers following graduation, and small firms can't always offer that," explained Hopson. "And public service employers can rarely offer that feature. Those who end up in public service positions for their 2L summer tend to be those dedicated to the public sector who realize that they might have difficulty getting that entry-level permanent public sector job when they

graduate, so they are committed to public service, and that commitment is the most important thing public employers are looking for."

Hopson said small firms look for the best person they can find who is serious about becoming a private sector lawyer. The emphasis is on focus and commitment, he said.

To be considered for a job at a public interest group, a candidate must understand and share the group's passion for its mission, as well as demonstrate empathy and concern for its clients, explained Beverly K. Bracker, Esq., Associate Director, Career Services, Thomas Jefferson School of Law. "For example, if the employer is an agency that helps battered women from Mexico who are trying to immigrate to the United States, then the applicant should really believe in that cause and have a strong urge to help these women."

She said with government agencies and public interest groups, being a team player and having personality are important factors in candidates. Bracker said public service employers also like to see candidates who have done community service, because it tends to show that the candidate cares about others and does not need monetary compensation.

"In addition, all employers prefer candidates with some relevant experience," said Bracker. "If a student does not yet have any legal experience, then he or she should bring out skills developed in a prior, non-legal job, which will help him or her to be a success in this job."

Thomas Jefferson School of Law has its own public interest summer internship fair, and its students participate in the large regional public interest job fair put together by all the ABA-approved law schools in Southern California. If students are interested in working at a small firm, many firms contact law school career services offices to seek help in finding law clerks or interns. "In addition, networking often leads to finding these positions," added Bracker. "Attending seminars,



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programs, social events, etc.—any time where students have the chance to meet and get to know attorneys—has the potential for leading to a job.”

What about getting an in-house position at a major corporation?

“In-house counsel’s offices ordinarily don’t hire law students for the summer,” said Hopson. “There are some exceptions—such as ALCOA and EXXON—which interview on campus, but they are about the only ones. They are paid.”

Hopson said unpaid work can show that one is serious about the area and will help down the line. “Since unpaid internships are almost always public sector, it is a sign of your commitment,” said Hopson.

Bracker said positions with corporations are usually internships. “Corporations generally prefer to hire attorneys who have spent a few years with a law firm. Interning during law school may help to get the corporation to make an exception to this general rule.”

Bracker said that internships can show that a student is committed to a particular area of law or that he/she is committed to that particular employer. Bracker said internships can give students the chance to prove themselves and show how smart, hardworking, and dedicated they are. She said if a student really shines, then his/her supervisor will want to help him/her as much as possible; and if that supervisor cannot hire the student for a post-graduation job, he/she may serve as a great reference or contact down the line.

“It often works out that a student starts out in an unpaid position one semester and really impresses the employer. Then the student stays on the next semester, and the employer starts paying him or her,” said Bracker.

She said sometimes, particularly with government agencies and public interest groups, a student may work unpaid for an employer over the course of several semesters and then be offered a post-graduation job.

Hopson said some of his school’s 2L students have public jobs this summer with Legal Aid Society of Hawaii, the Richmond Commonwealth’s Attorney, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Central Virginia Legal Aid, the Department of Defense, and the Humane Society of the United States.

“I would advise those students looking to really sink their teeth into work that matters [to] seek out positions at public interest firms or small law firms who practice in an area of great interest to the student,” said Solomon. “Typically, the salaries are lower, but the reward is tremendous.”

Bracker said students are urged to evaluate what type of experience they are going to be getting and to choose what will offer them the best experience and best preparation for long-term career goals. She said this might mean turning down a paid position for an unpaid position.

“And for those students who are struggling with what they want to do after law school, getting as many different pieces of legal experience during law school really helps them to figure out what they like and don’t like,” advised Bracker.

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