



Feature

## Working while in law school: Part 2

By Anayat Durrani

**Eric Wilmer started Chicago-Kent Law School in the fall of 2001. Like other evening students working full-time, he completed his J.D. degree in four years and graduated this past May. Married with two kids, his family has reluctantly become accustomed to missed soccer games and missed birthday parties because of his schedule, which now includes studying for the bar, which he will take in July.**



“Having spent the past week in an eight-week structured bar review course, I feel comfortable saying that it’s easier to attend law school and work full-time than it is to prepare for the bar exam,” said Wilmer. “I cannot imagine working full-time and preparing for the bar exam.”

Wilmer said his typical schedule over the past four years has been to have class Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings. He would typically spend 2-3 hours studying every Friday evening after work and dinner, a full 8-hour day studying every Saturday, and a 10-14 hour day studying every Sunday.

“This has been my schedule for the past four years. I have tended to do little school work Monday through Thursday, except for reviewing material to be covered that evening, during my lunch hour and between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m.”

Wilmer said that although his study habits may seem a bit extreme compared to those of his classmates, the majority of evening students who work full time could not have succeeded without such a high level of discipline.

“Working while in law school can be done; but it’s not easy, and it’s not for everyone. It takes extreme discipline and sacrifice,” said Wilmer, who worked as a Compliance Officer and HIPAA Privacy Officer, Assistant Vice President of Government Affairs, for a health insurer in Chicago. “Since evening students tend to be a little older, they have often been out of school for many years. Therefore, they will need to quickly reestablish good study habits.”

Saint Louis University Assistant Dean Rush said his school

encourages students, both full time and part time to apply for law-related employment opportunities that do not interfere with their legal studies.

“We sponsor many internship and externship programs, as well as clinical programs, for our upper-division students, which provide our students with valuable opportunities to gain practical experience, which we believe enhances their legal education,” said Rush.

He said the Career Services Office helps upper-division students seek legal employment and clerkships that can offer further educational opportunities.

“Students who do not obtain paid legal clerkships may be placed in volunteer, public service legal positions. Such students are eligible to receive monetary grants from our school to help defray their expenses while participating in those voluntary programs,” said Rush, who noted that they have more than 70 students this summer—mainly those who completed their first year of law school—who are receiving such grants.

For Chicago-Kent law student Kristen Prinz, she believes any work experience a student has while in law school, generally is looked favorably upon by employers. She currently works as the Marketing Director for a small personal injury firm. She said that although she has been able to gain some legal experience, her focus remains on marketing and business development.

“The attorneys I have spoken to have expressed approval, but they still stress grades and performance,” said Prinz.

However, Steve M. Bernstein—a hiring partner at Fisher & Phillips, LLP—said grades are but one of the many factors taken into consideration when evaluating a student’s candidacy.



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“What we are ultimately looking for is a broad snapshot that also factors in the student’s extracurricular activities; research and writing experience; and clinical, advocacy and interpersonal skills, among other things,” he said.

Prinz believes that working while in law school will make her a better lawyer for both employers and clients. She said that working can help build a student’s professional confidence, develop business and interpersonal skills, and help him/her become more flexible. “These are skills that school alone cannot teach you,” said Prinz.

Wilmer feels that although most employers would probably prefer to hire those with prior legal experience, he believes students can obtain legal experience without working for a traditional law firm.

“For example, students may have obtained legal experience while working in a corporate legal department. Chicago-Kent has a fee-generating clinic staffed by clinical professors and students, and this provides another opportunity for students to obtain legal experience during law school and earn credit toward their degree,” said Wilmer.

Wilmer spent about 16 years working in the health insurance industry—the last 12 years with the same company and the last 5 years as the compliance officer. He said a big motivation for him to attend law school was that most of his peers in the insurance industry already had law degrees.

“I hope to leverage my work experience, in combination with my law degree, to secure a new job,” said Wilmer.

Though Wilmer said he is among the few evening students who had a law-related job, he said those in non-legal careers can still leverage their work experience. He said some of his classmates are engineers and plan to practice intellectual property law.

“Their work experience clearly is useful and is something potential legal employers will view positively as being job-

related,” said Wilmer. “I expect some potential employers to have an appreciation for the discipline required to juggle work and law school, while other employers may view evening students as less desirable for having been distracted by work and not as focused on their studies as traditional day students.”

What do employers think about students who work while in law school?

“We certainly take a positive view toward those students who are willing to take on a paying job during law school to offset the high costs of tuition,” said Bernstein. “To the extent the student is able to do so without sacrificing academic performance, that tells us that he or she is typically well suited to the practice of law, which calls upon attorneys to effectively perform a number of tasks at the same time.”

Bernstein said that how a student manages his/her time is also important in a potential candidate, as there is “a positive correlation between such experience and effective legal skills.” Bernstein added that while most people can perform a single assigned task with little problem, the reality of the legal profession is that students must be highly skilled at multitasking.

“We are looking for candidates who demonstrate an ability to take on a number of tasks at any given time—and to perform them all equally well,” explained Bernstein.

Does the analysis change when a student is not from a top-50 school?

“To the extent the candidate matriculates at a law school in the second tier or below, such factors might take on added significance, as we look to ‘cast a wide net,’” said Bernstein. “I don’t want to overstate this, however, as work experience would be a relevant consideration regardless of the profile of the school attended.”

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