



Robert Dockery - Choosing a specialty and playing nice in the law firm sandbox

[by Teresa Talerico]

Robert Dockery, a shareholder and recruiter at *Jenkins & Gilchrist* in Dallas, has some sound advice for law clerks, interns and young attorneys: respect the paralegals, legal secretaries and other staff in the firm. Never act superior.

"Sometimes we see people treat fellow attorneys one way and treat staff a different way," Mr. Dockery said. "That comes back to bite them when we find out about it. We certainly think how you treat everybody in the firm is important. We don't appreciate it when somebody puts on a certain personality for the lawyers, which may be different from their true personality that they show the staff."

Playing nice with everyone in the firm is among many ways to ensure longevity. Mr. Dockery should know. He joined *Jenkins & Gilchrist* after he graduated in 1980 from *Texas Tech University Law School* and has been there virtually ever since, with the exception of a hiatus of several years. He specializes in corporate securities law.

Q: How did you find your specialty?

A: For me, the summer associate program was very valuable. It gave me enough of a taste of what lawyers do in different areas to easily direct me into the corporate area. I tried litigation for a while. I tried different areas, but it was pretty clear to me that I preferred corporate law.

Q: What do you look for when hiring applicants?

A: Obviously we have to look at their academic record and their extracurricular activities. But once we get them in the door, during the course of the summer, we're looking primarily for a good fit. Obviously good legal work is essential. But beyond that, [we look for] personality, somebody who enjoys being in the office, someone who gets along well with

others, attorneys, staff and other people, just someone we enjoy working with.

Q: What's the biggest mistake graduates make when job hunting?

A: In some cases, there is a mistake [in assuming] that getting a summer clerkship at our firm is basically only a formality to getting an offer. And they don't make the effort or don't exhibit a lot of the enthusiasm or a lot of the skills because they think they basically got in on the strength of their resume. We really do look at people over the course of the summer, and people have lost jobs by taking an attitude that wasn't very friendly or cooperative.

Q: How would you advise first year students about choosing a type of law? What should they do in school?

A: I would suggest that they should try as much as they can to get a summer experience. Not necessarily the first year, but certainly a second year clerkship program is something they should try to get. Until they have the opportunity to get in an office and see what lawyers do, I don't think they'll have a good feel for it. The study of law is very different from the practice of law. Don't decide you don't want to be a corporate lawyer, for example, because you didn't like the corporations and business entities course. That's really very different than the practice. By the same token, don't say you don't want to be a litigator because you didn't like civil procedure. I would suggest that they try to pick a career based upon what they experienced in a clerkship or part-time job situation.

Q: How can they make that transition from student to attorney easier?

A: They ought to just treat this as an on-the-job learning experience and recognize that other than some of the research and writing skills that they learned, a lot of what they learned in law school is not going to be particularly relevant to them as they practice the law. Treat it as a blank slate. You're going in to learn, you don't know anything and you're soaking up as much as you can.

Q: What's one thing they don't teach in law school that they should?

A: Most schools fail in teaching a course on what it's like to be a lawyer - basic practice skills, negotiating skills, skills in handling clients and fellow lawyers, things like that.

Q: What are some common stumbling blocks for new associates?

A: The most common one is the failure to ask enough questions, the concern of being perceived as slow or not very bright. I think young lawyers should feel free to ask lots of questions. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Use the resources available to you with the lawyers that are closest to you in age. Go to the second- and third-year lawyers who have been there and ask them questions about what to do and get advice. Get advice from your peers so you don't make mistakes that can be easily avoided.