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The Business

Employment Dance Helps Students

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Zachary Turke recalls the day a partner at Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton asked whether he had a passport.

"I said yes, and he walked away," said Turke, a Harvard Law School student who recently completed a summer-associate stint with the firm. "That was the end of the conversation."

SUMMER ASSOCIATES

Until, that is, the partner called Turke at 9 a.m. on a Saturday to ask whether he could catch a flight leaving for Taiwan that night.

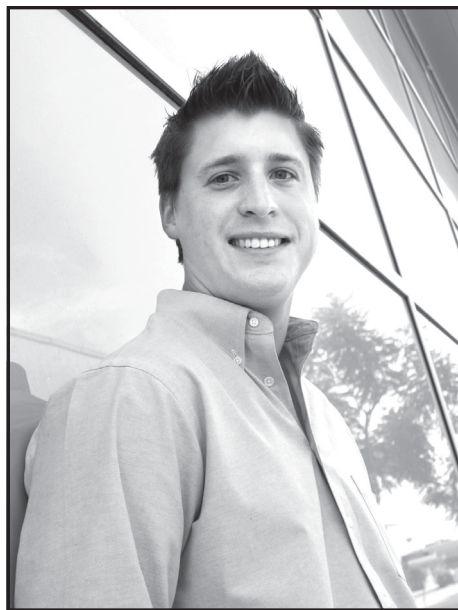
Within hours, the 23-year-old law student was headed for three days of substantive negotiations between two companies contemplating a merger.

Turke, who was considering a career as a transactional attorney, called the experience a "capping moment in my education."

"The partner took me everywhere with him: negotiations, strategy meetings, dinners with clients," Turke said. "I'd done a couple corporate projects, but this was the big picture of how a deal comes together."

Although summer-associate programs are famous for generous salaries and social calendars, they are, beneath it all, an extended employment dance.

While firms are evaluating students' skills, personalities, work ethic and long-term potential, students are assessing what area of law they feel most comfortable practicing, and they are determining whether their summer firm is a potential match for a longer commitment.



ROBERT LEVINS / Daily Journal

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In recent years, firms have been eager to create unique and challenging assignments to give summers a taste of what lies ahead.

The methods vary from firm to firm. For example, at Sheppard Mullin, summer associates rotate among practice areas in two-week intervals. At Pillsbury Winthrop, the summer is split between litigation and transactional law.

"There are jobs appropriate for summer associates, and there are jobs that aren't," said Michael Kass, hiring partner at Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman in San Francisco. "Document review, for example, is not. We learn nothing about them, and they learn nothing about us."

Neither are "rush products," Kass said.

"First of all, they're a drag, which is not right for our program," he said. "And we don't expect any of them to have the answer to something overnight."

At Morgan Lewis, members of the firm's summer-associate program not only lent a hand on high-profile cases but also had the opportunity to represent, with limited attorney supervision, individuals seeking asylum in the United States.

Two San Francisco summer associates, Steph Johnson and Lucy Schwallie, successfully represented Fathi Mohammed Yusuf in connection with his claim for asylum before the Immigration Court in Port Isabel, Texas.

Yusuf is a Somali refugee who spent years living in a United Nations camp in Kenya before seeking asylum.

Alex Ponce de Leon, a summer associate at Pillsbury Winthrop in San Francisco, worked on a pro bono death-penalty case and helped a Spanish-speaking client apply for asylum.

"The partner trusted me to take the lead on that, and at one point I filled out several applications for the client," Ponce de Leon said. "The partner didn't speak Spanish, and it is my native language."

"There was a great deal of trust in the summer associates."

Greenberg Traurig summer associate Anna Fudacz said she was surprised at the respect that accompanied the assignments she was given, which included drafting contracts.

"I know a lot of times the summer associates write a memo that gets stuck in a drawer somewhere," said Fudacz, who is pursuing a career in entertainment law. "That wasn't the case here."

During Fudacz's summer internship, she

also was given the opportunity to participate in the firm's Business Challenge, a program modeled after NBC's television show "The Apprentice."

"We were split into groups and looked at issues like the changing global economy and whether the firm should expand," she said. "I got to know the other summer associates on the phone, and at the end, they flew us to New York so we could present our ideas."

Gone, Fudacz said, are the days when summer associates spent their internship simply being wined and dined.

"I heard stories from several years ago that no one did any work," she said. "They'd just be taken out all the time."

Still, along with a heavy workload, summer and first-year associates often receive substantial perks.

For example, at Greenberg Traurig, summer associates attended a get-to-know-you luxury retreat with senior partners and associates from across the state.

"The social aspect is pretty intense," said Morton, who rattled off a list of activities

ranging from dinner at partners' homes to go-cart racing, beach parties to nights at the Hollywood Bowl.

Todd Gordinier, a partner at Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth's Newport Beach office, oversaw a summer-associate program at Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker in 1985.

At the time, Gordinier said, there were "dozens, and I mean dozens, of summer associates."

"Back then, it was more entertaining, less demands," he said. "Today, there's a sense that the firms are more selective, and both the firms and the law students come more focused. They expect substantive work."

Still, Stradling Yocca summer associates were treated to boat harbor cruises, trips to Disneyland and social events intended to showcase the firm's Orange County offices.

"People aren't always familiar with Orange County, and we wanted to show them what it's like," Gordinier said. "We also want to get to know them and want them to get to know us."

"A law firm is comprised of its people."

Part of what holds a law firm together is the glue of friendship and camaraderie."

For Turke, who interviewed with 32 firms before coming to work for Sheppard Mullin, having hands-on experience in transactional law helped him to choose it over the other areas he had been considering.

"Being a law student, it's kind of hard to figure out what you want to do," he said. "It makes the interview process stressful, because you're being asked that a lot. I thought I wanted to do transactional, but I didn't know because I hadn't done it."

His time at Sheppard Mullin, Turke said, was "better than I expected it to be."

Though he had yet to receive an offer as of press time, Turke said he would "definitely choose [Sheppard Mullin] if they'll have me."

"I expected that the summer would give me a better idea of what area of law I wanted to practice, but I didn't expect them to be so receptive to helping me figure it out," he said. "Now, I can definitely say what I want to be."