

Shifting dynamics for summer associates

by Patrick Thornton

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Despite the uncertain business climate, the summer associate program remains a dependable way for Twin Cities law firms to fill their ranks with the next generation of legal talent.

The class sizes have shrunk or remained flat over the last few years at many local firms, but the programs are not going away. Law firms report that using the summer program, in addition to making the right lateral hires, as the most effective way to balance the future demand for legal work with the optimal size workforce. The summer program is a tested way to train law students to become good lawyers and to give them a taste of the culture of a firm.



The summer associate class at Leonard, Street and Deinard. (From left: Sarah Pruett, Laura Nelson, Ryan Sugden, Emily Semo, Kate Solheim and Analee Leach.) The summer associate program is still one of the preferred ways for medium and large firms to fill their ranks. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

“What we like about our summer program

is it allows us to have these attorneys who have been grown organically, so to speak, and haven’t seen the policies and cultures at other firms,” said Peter Michaud, the hiring partner and head of recruitment at Lindquist & Vennum in Minneapolis. **“It’s nice that their entire career is here; they grow up with us and that is very beneficial ... I was a summer in 1996, and I have been here ever since.”**

On the coasts, many larger firms have pared down or eliminated their summer programs as the demand for legal services went south and law firms did not need to compete as dramatically for top legal talent or need as many lawyers. There are examples of cuts locally, but firms have not done away with the programs.

Dorsey & Whitney had 14 summer associates in 2010 and 44 in 2009. Robins Kaplan Miller & Ciresi had 20 summer associates in 2005 and 16 in 2010. Faegre & Benson had 23 summer associates in 2010, half as many as in 2009. Minnesota Lawyer asked for the size of the summer associate classes at the three firms for 2011, but they were not provided.

At Lindquist & Vennum the firm hires about seven summer associates each year. In 2006 the firm brought on seven summer associates, and all seven accepted full-time positions with the firm. In 2007, the firm brought on nine summer associates, and all nine accepted offers. In 2008 the firm hired eight summer associates, made offers to seven and four accepted. In 2009 the class size was seven, six had job offers and five accepted. Last year six summers were hired, four were offered jobs and four accepted. The offer and acceptance rates for 2011 were not finalized as of press time.

At Leonard, Street and Deinard, eight summer associates were brought on in 2006 and offers were made to all eight. In 2007 the firm brought on 15 summer associates and made offers to 14. In 2008 there were seven summer associates, and job offers were made to all seven. In 2009, offers were made to five of the eight summer associates. In 2010 offers were made to all six summer associates. The firm is meeting in late August to decide on offers to this year’s class of six.

Joel Abrahamson, Leonard, Street and Deinard’s hiring partner, said crafting the size of each summer associate class is of the utmost importance for the financial health of the firm. Because law firms often make job offers to summer associates at the end of their second year of law

school, there is pressure to forecast what the business climate will look like in the future. Bring on too many lawyers and there won't be enough work; bring on too few and the firm could lose out on business because no one has time to do it.

"We are careful and we are thoughtful when we decide how large the summer class is going to be and must also take into account how many lateral hires we will be bringing aboard and any people returning from a judicial clerkship as well," he said. "When we look at the summer class size, it is with the notion that if everyone does well, we would make offers to everyone. It's not a question of what we can afford or having a lot of summers and then only making an offer to half."

The recruitment committee meets with the practice group leaders and heads of the various divisions at the firm to analyze the firm's needs. Abrahamson said before bringing on a summer, he wants to make sure there is sufficient work. Summer associates are encouraged to work on a variety of projects during the program to discover what kind of law they are interested in and where they can be successful as a full-time associate.

"We want to give the summer associate a feel of what life would be like here as a first-year [associate]," said Kari Jensen Thomas, the director of attorney recruiting, development and firmwide diversity at Leonard, Street and Deinard. "For the first part of the summer, we match [the summer associates] with attorneys who provide them with projects, but in the second half we coach them to go out and seek work they are interested in and encourage them to fill their own plate."

The softer legal economy for recent law school graduates has changed the demographics of the summer associate classes in the Twin Cities. The National Association for Legal Career Professionals (NALP) recently released a survey finding that the median starting salary for new law school graduates from the class of 2010 fell 13 percent from the 2009 class. The report also showed that average starting salary in private practice fell 20 percent for the 2010 class. Jobs that paid in the \$40,000 to \$65,000 range accounted for almost half of reported salaries for graduates who found jobs in 2010. For the classes of 2008 and 2009, salaries in the \$40,000 to \$65,000 range only accounted for about 40 percent of the jobs in the NALP study.

Simply put, students who a few years ago would have had multiple offers awaiting them upon graduation, are now having to look farther and wider for a job. Local firms traditionally turned to the four local law schools or schools in the upper Midwest for summer hires but now have been able to attract a broader applicant pool.

At Lindquist & Vennum for example, the firm has hired summers from schools like Harvard Law School, Yale Law School and Vanderbilt University Law School recently.

"I call it the Sept. 11 effect," Michaud said. "Yes, the East Coast firms are hiring less, but also I've noticed a change in what a law student is looking for in a job. It's not just about prestige and working a ton of hours and making a ton of money. We see more people who want a life and a career. It's not just that there are fewer jobs, I think students are saying they want more out of life."

This year's class of summer associates has already finished for the summer, or will very soon, but there isn't much downtime before firms have to start thinking about 2012. In fact, many on-campus interviews for next summer's group start later this month.

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