

The Soft Skills a Corporate Externship Program Teaches

CORPORATE COUNSEL

This article originally appeared as the second of four articles on SMU Dedman Law's corporate counsel externship program in Corporate Counsel (Online) magazine in March 2016. It is reprinted here with permission. Copyright 2016 ALM Media Properties, LLC All Rights Reserved



Author Stephen Yeager, Lennox International CLO John Torres and deputy GC Betty Ungerman.

By Stephen B. Yeager

When the corporate counsel externship program began, I focused on teaching students about the substantive legal issues that in-house attorneys encounter. I was delighted to discover, however, that students also learned a number of equally important "soft skills" like teamwork, communication and time management through their externships.

Chandrika Shori, who externed at American Airlines Inc., said, "We joked about how American would be my lab, and it truly has been! It's been a place for me to practice my skills and try out new techniques." The corporate legal departments truly have been "mini laboratories" for our students. The 50 companies participating in the program allow our students to work side-by-side with lawyers in their legal departments. They learn contract drafting, legal analysis and reasoning; they research actual legal issues in real time and make presentations. They learn how to solve problems as part of a team. Practice is often

the only way to get better at something, and this program, unlike most other law school courses, gives students the opportunity to practice their skills.

Students often comment that their communication skills improve over the course of their externships. I believe this is due in large part to the instruction they receive from in-house counsel -- communication experts who have learned the best ways to communicate with their non-lawyer business colleagues in a way these co-workers can understand. They teach the students what they themselves have learned, including the best communication methods to use in different situations. They also critique externs' emails, legal memoranda and presentation skills. Students quickly learn to start with the answer, keep it short and use plain English (not legal jargon). They also become proficient at communicating the results of their research, often orally and on short notice, when asked to quickly find the answer to a pressing question.

One recent alum explained it this way: "Communication is an essential skill I developed through my externship. The ability to explain complex legal concepts and analysis to a person without a law degree is something that just can't be learned in a classroom. As an attorney, I may speak with the chief legal officer of a major corporation and an auto-mechanic in the same day. I have to tailor my conversations in a way that each will comprehend, and this is an important skill I learned as an extern."

Another skill I have observed students develop is attention to detail, which is undoubtedly one of the most important skills for an attorney. Externs learn that they must review every document they create thoroughly to ensure consistency and accuracy, and that getting entity names right is crucial. It is far better for students to learn this valuable lesson now by making mistakes in a low-risk environment than to learn it the hard way when stakes are much higher.

Teamwork is another soft skill that most externs learn. Because externs are integrated into their companies, they get the opportunity to observe how lawyers work as a team and interact with their internal business clients. They learn the importance of responsiveness, follow-through and other soft client relations skills through this process.

Anne Moretti, the first extern at Lennox International, used her experience as a certified public accountant before law school to help her on a project that involved both legal and accounting issues. As a CPA, she said that the project allowed her to learn how the legal and accounting departments worked together to formulate an approach to solving the issue. The externship program also helped Jeff Connor, an alum now working as a compliance analyst, learn how to work with several departments on a single project. Jeff says, "This ability has been vital to my work at Hudson Advisors, where I am involved in projects with many different departments of the firm on a daily basis."

Externs must report their time to me to receive academic credit. Thus it was the perfect opportunity to teach timekeeping and billing skills. These days, corporate counsel are keeping a close eye on law firm invoices, reviewing them for errors and inefficiencies. In class, I teach students how to write good, accurate descriptions with results-oriented verbs while being sensitive to revealing confidential information. I also review their weekly timesheets and provide them with specific feedback to help them become better timekeepers.



Lennox International's John Torres and Betty Ungerman teaching a class on working with outside counsel.

In our second class John Torres and Betty Ungerman, the chief legal officer and deputy general counsel at Lennox International, present a scenario where I play the role of a taxi driver. Mr. Torres plays the passenger and Ms. Ungerman a back-up driver. The skit effectively illustrates what the legal process feels like for most clients who pay for legal services based on a similar model. Students see the anxiety level of the passenger rise as I take him on the longest route possible with an additional driver also charging.

One former extern, Jordan Wynn, brought the skit up in a law firm interview. He discussed what he had learned in class and at his externship with Reddy Ice about the "dos and don'ts" of billing. After the interview, he said, "within a few hours, I received a phone call with a job offer. I can't help but think, given my rather ordinary GPA, that what set me apart from the 50 other candidates was my understanding of client billing concerns, which I never would have learned without the corporate counsel externship program."

One student comment I see consistently on final evaluations is that students gain confidence in their legal skills and abilities. This comment surprised me at first, but now I come to expect it every year. Confidence is an important trait for young lawyers. When students finish the program, they are confident they have the practical skills and substantive knowledge it takes to succeed in their first real legal job, whether it is in a law firm, corporation or government agency. Typically, law schools alone don't instill much confidence in their students. To the contrary, they do an excellent job of making students (particularly first-years) feel like they don't know very much. This program helps build law students back up and realize, "Hey, I've got this!"

In the field, externs receive immediate feedback from seasoned attorneys who also evaluate their performance formally twice during the semester. In student evaluations, attorneys often identify characteristics in their externs that make a great attorney and communicate these to the students. Their externs are smart, "get it," are hard workers, are great with people and are "quick studies." Often, field supervisors comment that the work product our students produce is of such quality that it can be shared with the business people directly without having to be re-done by legal. When students discover that they can successfully complete real-world legal projects, they gain a sense of satisfaction.

Externships also teach students to juggle workflow by prioritizing their projects and managing client expectations. Students sometimes find it challenging to balance the trickle and flow of the short-term

urgent projects with the long-term research assignments they receive. Jade Mens, who is now serving as an Assistant Criminal District Attorney for Tarrant County, says some of the time-management skills she gained in her externship have helped her in her current job.

"Although I came to law school with 10 years of prior work experience," she noted, "the corporate counsel externship program sharpened certain skills that I use daily in my job as a prosecutor. My semester at Commercial Metals Company enhanced my ability to work on small teams, manage my time and hone my oral and written communication skills. Specifically, my ability to manage a docket of 500-plus cases, work closely with one partner in a busy trial court, and represent the citizens of Tarrant County week after week would not be possible without the training and discipline I received through this program."

Students learn that in-house counsel do not have the luxury of giving a perfect answer every time. Corporate counsel often have to give the best answer possible in the time allowed with limited information. Often, a "B" answer has to suffice because there are just not enough resources and hours in the day to give an "A+" one.

Sometimes, an appreciation of the soft skills sinks in much later in life. I feel fortunate that our externs get a head start on developing these skills while still in law school.

Stephen B. Yeager is the assistant dean for student affairs at SMU Dedman School of Law. Before joining SMU, he was general counsel of a financial services firm and an attorney at Jones Day in Dallas. He can be reached at syeager@smu.edu.