

# What Law Students Gain When They Work as Corporate Externs

## CORPORATE COUNSEL

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Extern Tyler Eyrich (the "tree" to the right of "Katy Perry") at the Fossil Group legal department's Halloween costume contest.

*By Stephen B. Yeager*

In today's world, employers demand recent law graduates who can "hit the ground running." And the experience students gain in corporate externships helps prepare them for those expectations. In the very first class session, I stress, "Your externship is a learning experience. It's not the pathway to a legal job like a summer clerkship is with a law firm, but the skills, substantive experience, broader networks and stronger résumés you build through the program can make you more attractive to legal employers."

The program helps students gain experience they can include on their résumés and makes them more attractive to prospective employers. I show them how to include their externship experience on their

résumés, just as they would any other legal experience, so they can highlight the valuable training and practical experience they acquire over the course of the semester.

By the time students participate in the externship program as 3Ls, most have litigation experience working with a judge or a law firm. All too often, however, externs have no transactional experience, which can be much more difficult for students to obtain in law school. One of the side benefits of the externship program is that it provides a large number of transactional placements where students can work with contracts, conduct due diligence and attend negotiations. As an example, one student assisted attorneys with a credit agreement and observed the agreement evolve from the first draft to the closing. Another student worked on compliance checklists and schedules, allowing her to delve into regulations governing public companies and to review the company's policies for compliance.

The program also provides students with educational experiences they could not obtain in the classroom. For example, students have the opportunity to work in very specialized practice areas it would be difficult for them to learn about in law school or at law firms, such as fashion law, cybersecurity, healthcare compliance, aviation taxation and food labeling law.

Sometimes incoming externs, particularly those from the evening program, lack experience because they worked non-legal jobs throughout law school. Other students may lack the type of experience they desire because they were less competitive for large-firm clerkships, which typically offer more specialized practice areas than small, mid-size or boutique firms. Externships provide much-needed experience for these students, which helps make them stronger candidates for permanent employment.

Externships also help students explore additional career options. Many externs work in areas of the law they never even knew existed, and discover that they enjoy the area. If students find that the job opportunity they thought they wanted is not feasible, they now know that satisfying alternatives exist. Along the same lines, the program opens students' eyes to in-house practice and often piques their interest in working as corporate counsel at some point in their careers.

The relationships externs form during the semester can be extremely helpful in their job searches. I encourage students to take the initiative in meeting lawyers at their placements and asking to work with them. Most field supervisors are fantastic at making sure their externs know every member of the legal department. In just four months, some of our students get the opportunity to work or interact with almost every member of their legal team.

The externships can also give students an opportunity to meet non-lawyers in their companies. Students are regularly included in office activities like chili cook-offs and Halloween parties, where the legal department competes against other departments in the company. The legal department at Fossil Group (including their extern) actually dressed up as the different Taylor Swifts from her "Shake It Off" music video for the company's Halloween celebration and won first place! Birthday parties, factory tours, and other office events allow students to grow their networks. When students leave their externships, they may have a strong network not only of attorneys but also business colleagues, which can make a difference in their job searches.

Students who perform well in corporate counsel externships may receive good references from inside counsel at major corporations based on first-hand knowledge of the students' work product, work ethic and personality. Solid recommendations by corporate counsel to their outside law firms and/or

counterparts at other companies can be instrumental in a student's job search and may tip the scales in his or her favor.

Indeed, some students have found permanent job opportunities as a result of contacts made in their externships. One extern secured a first-year associate position with the corporate/securities section of a large firm based in part on strong references given by the attorneys at her placement with a publicly traded company. Law firm partners tell me they have received calls from clients who have experience with students through this program, and have recommended the students for first-year associate positions. Recommendations by clients can go a long way.

For decades, corporate legal departments hired new lawyers from law firms where they typically gained five to seven years of experience. They never hired straight out of law school. That is beginning to change. Some corporate legal departments are now hiring lawyers with fewer than three years of experience and some right out of law school, becoming more like firms that seek attorneys at all experience levels.

One example of this recent trend is program alumna Anima Nawaz, who was recently hired by her externship placement, Sky Chefs Inc. Anima says early in law school she knew she wanted to work as in-house counsel and was matched with Sky Chefs. On the last day of her externship, she was offered a paid internship for the spring semester, which she accepted and continued to work there after graduation while studying for the bar exam. Anima says, "My persistence as an extern and an intern with Sky Chefs paid off when I was hired as an associate attorney in September 2015, but it really would not have been possible if it weren't for the externship that allowed me an introduction to the company in the first place."

Former students tell me all the time that employers routinely ask about externship placements in legal interviews. I think attorneys find the experience interesting and appreciate the value of what students learn through the program.

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