

Summer Associates A Special Report

Freedom From Filing

One student's story of his last-minute escape from a summer of drudgery.



BY MITCH ROTHENBERG

What causes a last-minute bailout? What happens when you mix a part-time law clerk with dull work, low pay, a scary file room, and a sense that there isn't a future with a firm? The following is my story. I'm hoping it will prove to be a cautionary tale for some. Perhaps it will inspire others. Or, if nothing else, maybe it will help explain why I felt the need to jump-ship from my firm with less than a week before spring finals.

It was some time in April of my second year of law school. I found myself working at a small firm for \$12.50 an hour, doing rather mind-numbing litigation work. Unlike many of my peers who had signed up to work at fancy firms, where the summer associates were treated like precious metals (and paid in similar fashion), I had, in a moment of job-searching desperation, agreed to work in a much less glamorous setting.

The job had begun in the winter; I had agreed to work as a part-time law clerk during the spring semester, with the understanding that I'd work full time in the summer.

The firm employed four law clerks year-round to drudge through the mountains of litigation prep work. I had expected the job to be less cushy than the big-firm gigs, but I was unprepared for the banality of much of the work. Occasionally, we would do some interesting research or draft a complaint, but the job mainly consisted of answering interrogatories, writing summaries of depositions and medical records, making trips to the courthouse, and searching through the file rooms.

THE EVIL ROOM

The file rooms were by far the worst part. They were the type of place where you needed to suck in your stomach and crawl through three rows of boxes just to find a document. We gave one file room the nickname the "Resident Evil Room," since the only light bulb would flicker constantly, creating a gloomy, haunted-house setting.

Once, I found myself tiptoeing on a shaky stepladder, half hoping to fall so that I could utter the magic words "workman's comp," and spend the next few months with my leg in a sling watching daytime television. I think it was that particular moment, wondering whether a previous law clerk at the firm had ever intentionally fallen off a stepladder, when I realized that a lateral move would be a good call.

So I returned to Staples for a third package of linen resume paper and prepared myself for another round of job hunting. I had a pretty good résumé, especially since I now had several months of real legal work experience under my belt, and getting interviews wasn't too difficult through my school's career services Web site.

The hard part was taking time off from work to get to the interviews. Originally, I tried the standard doctor's appointment approach, which went over well for a while, since doctors' appointments are often time-consuming and are sometimes far away. It was a little awkward, however, standing in the office in my best suit pants (I'd hide the jacket in my car, so as not to look too nice) and telling my co-worker that I had a dentist appointment at 3 p.m., but I thought I'd better leave work at 1 p.m. to make sure I got there early. Either it was completely obvious what I was doing, or I seemed like some guy who was way too obsessed with oral hygiene.

After that fiasco, I began to make the appointments during non-workdays, and just skipped class instead. I'm sure I probably missed some fascinating lectures, but no one asked questions when I showed up late to class in a suit. Other days, I scheduled really early interviews and simply showed up to work a little late.

While many people think the best course of action in such situations is to be up front with your boss, I couldn't agree less. Being open and frank sounds good in theory, but it likely would have done nothing more than create a hostile work environment for me.

The whole idea behind two weeks' notice is that you only have to deal with the glaring eyes for two weeks. Imagine what workplaces would be like if employees told their boss about every other interview they went on. Everybody would walk around on eggshells, and bosses would be convinced that they were about to lose their whole staff at any second.

THERE'S SOMEONE ELSE

Also, telling your boss that you're going on another interview is like telling your girlfriend that you're going on a date with another girl who's prettier than she. Envision how well that conversation would go: "Listen, Honey, I love you a lot, but there's this better-looking girl that I want to meet for dinner. Don't worry; I'm just looking. It probably won't work out, and then I'll come back here and we can watch 'Desperate Housewives' together. OK?"

The way I see it, if you don't get the new job, then no one's feelings get hurt, and everyone can work happily together for the rest of the summer. Also, why have two awkward "I'm leaving you" conversations when you need only have one?

Fortunately, I landed a great new job with a firm that I thought was a really good match for me. Unfortunately, I got the job offer four days before I was supposed to take time off work for finals, and the new job was to start directly after finals.

So I found myself in the wonderful situation of telling my current boss that I wasn't staying for the summer and that my last day would be that coming Friday. It wasn't quite two weeks' notice, but I rationalized it with the fact that my boss already knew I wasn't going to be working for the two weeks during finals, and thus could use that time to find a replacement for me. When I explained my quirky logic to a friend, she simply said, "Tell yourself whatever you need to in order to feel better." Which I did, and it did.

QUITTING TIME

Quitting was still hard. After all, my boss was the woman who had helped put food on my plate, pay my rent, and subsidize my entertainment for the past several months. Also, while I

wasn't crazy about the work I was doing, I really liked the people I was working with. I figured the best approach was to slouch my shoulders, cringe my brow, and try to look as sheepish as possible.

When it came to the actual moment, I slipped into her office, leaned against a chair, and simply said, "I need to tell you something." She looked up from her papers and responded, "What?"

"I really like working here, but I've had another offer. It was a last-minute type of thing, but it's a really great firm that I think I'll really like working with. The firm also does a lot of interesting intellectual property work [which my current firm didn't practice], and the pay is a lot better," I said.

"So, are you going to take it?"

"I think so," I said, which really meant, I already have.

She looked sad, and told me that she had a lot of big projects lined up and had been counting on me that summer. I said I was sorry and wished that I could have given more notice. And that was that. It was hard, but like getting a tooth pulled, you feel much better once it's over.

The next couple of days were a little rough. There was clearly a lot of tension in the air, but I typed up a nice letter of resignation, explaining how much I had enjoyed working at the firm. I think that helped, but I was still assigned what amounted to a 10-hour project in the file room, matching up certified mail receipts with files that were as much as 10 years old. It was a fitting way to end my time there.

But eventually my boss wrote me a nice note telling me that she wished me well and congratulating me on my new job. Everybody else at the office was very supportive, and I think I left on generally good terms.

I'm not completely sure what to make of the experience. I guess the lesson here is probably this: While it might be bad form to jump-ship with summer right around the corner, it sure beats spending the next three months feeling trapped in the file room, searching for files by an old flickering light bulb.

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