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Working for free

I clerked at some amazing places throughout my law school career. And I couldn't be more grateful for those opportunities.

In all the places I clerked at while in law school, however, I have never been paid. I worked for government agencies on the federal, state and county levels. I also worked for a small law firm. None of those clerkships paid me anything at all.

I think there is a common misconception that law students spend their summers working at large firms and are paid pretty well for the effort.

At least that was my impression before I went to law school. Indeed, even in this down economy, I know some law students who earned enough money as summer associates to pay for a year of their law school tuition. But I know even more law students who worked for minimum wage or for free, even at some of the larger firms.

There are, however, a few silver linings to not getting paid — one of which is greater flexibility.

At every one of my clerkships, I always had a great work schedule. My supervisors went out of their way to ensure that my work schedule dovetailed well with my class schedule.

I was never asked to stay late or to take work home over the weekend, which some of my compensated peers have had to do.

Additionally, all the attorneys for whom I have worked were quick to show their gratitude for the additional help.

They knew that I was not earning a paycheck and that the clerkship was a learning experience for me. Even when I made mistakes, the attorneys took the time to patiently teach me how to fix them. One of my friends went so far as to tell me that she is glad that the

personal-injury firm where she interns does not pay her. She said that she feels less pressure about making mistakes and can concentrate more on the learning aspects of her work given that she is not receiving a paycheck for her efforts.

Of course, some law students would happily trade schedule flexibility and lessened pressure for a good paycheck.

Other students would be happy to just break even and not lose money by working at their clerkship. Not only did one of my summer clerkships not pay me, but it actually cost me money to work there. I was not taking any school courses that summer, so I did not receive the discounted student CTA pass. Every day I took the L to and from my clerkship and every day it cost me \$4.50 just to go to my unpaid job. I realize that \$4.50 does not seem that bad, especially to those driving and burning up gas money on their commute. But \$4.50 a day adds up quickly without any income.

One day that summer I was running late so I took a taxi to work. My supervising attorney suggested that I never spend money to take a taxi to my unpaid job, even if I was running late.

The attorneys in that same office also took me out to lunch every Friday. At every one of my unpaid clerkships, the attorneys took me out to lunch at least once — a small gesture which really means a lot to a seriously cash-poor law student.

Furthermore, there are some additional benefits to working for free. Students who work for the government or for a nonprofit can earn school credit for their internship.

This is a great way to earn more school credits and even lighten the course load during the school year. There is even a classroom

component so that students can meet with professors to discuss the progress of their clerkships.

The downside to the course credit option, however, is that students still must pay full tuition for the credits. I earned course credit for two of my clerkships and, sometimes, I admit, it did feel like I was paying to work.

I personally prefer the federal work study programs. Federal work study is an option where the law school pays students an hourly rate for their time spent working for free at a government agency or nonprofit. However, the available money for federal work study is limited.

Students must apply for federal work study and it is not a guaranteed opportunity. Additionally, the hourly rate I earn with federal work study is still less than what most of my paid peers are earning, but it is definitely better than not earning anything at all.

Through it all, I have had countless discussions with my law school peers about working for free and every conversation ends on the same idea: That this will all be worth it.

For me personally, the lack of a paycheck has not diminished the value of my clerkship experiences.

And I think that my peers agree with me. Even on the hardest days, we still recognize the benefits that we are receiving from our clerkships.

We all recognize that we are learning valuable skills, making important connections, building our resumes and putting ourselves that much closer to our legal careers. We know that soon we will be earning a paycheck. We may even supervise our own unpaid clerks someday. ■

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