

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 160, No. 10

First-year lawyers get a range of practice in Much, Shelist program

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When Caroline E. Belloff arrived at Much, Shelist P.C. as an apprentice in late 2011, she was set on becoming a litigator.

One day, while looking at a corporate transaction, she realized that she wouldn't be practicing law in the courtroom.

"My job is to look at what is about to be sold and see all the contingencies and the plans," she said. "Because I naturally enjoy planning, so much of it was a perfect fit for my personality. I would've never realized this would play to my strengths."

Belloff's realization came via a 12-month program at Much, Shelist that provides one first-year lawyer every year with training in the firm's various practice areas while also receiving mentoring from other attorneys at the firm that has about 80 lawyers in the downtown Chicago.

Unlike summer associate programs, Much, Shelist Director of Attorney Recruitment and Professional Development Jennifer G. Gallinson said, apprentices are not anchored to one practice group and can take assignments from all practice areas.

The apprentices start at a lower salary than first-year associates and have no billable-hour requirements, which gives them flexibility to attend training seminars, to observe partners in court and to sit in on client meetings.

While there are a handful of apprenticeship programs at large law firms across the U.S., the Much, Shelist program, which started in 2011, is unique for one of its size.

"The requirement is really to learn and find out what resonates with you," said Much, Shelist managing partner Mitchell S. Roth.

The firm abandoned its summer associate program more



Caroline E. Belloff

than a decade ago because the firm lacked the resources to handle it and the program had a low retention rate. After a summer experience, Roth said, many associates wanted to see what larger firms were like.

"We would lose people for no other reason than curiosity," he said. "Our retention was much higher hiring midlevel associates."

When the recession hit, Roth said, the market was filled with "young, disillusioned, talented attorneys" buried in student loan debt with nowhere to go. The firm wanted to provide a positive experience for new graduates in hopes that they will stay in the legal field.

Much, Shelist saw the apprenticeship program as a way to give back to the profession by investing in new attorneys. It also brought in younger associates to infuse new ideas into the firm's culture.

Apprentices can transition to permanent associates if an opportunity is available when their one-year commitment is over. When apprentices want to move to another firm, Much, Shelist helps them find another job.

"When I graduated, many people took whatever they could take. In that first year, I felt



Mitchell S. Roth

fortunate that a firm was invested in my learning," said Belloff, who is now a full-time associate in the firm's business and finance practice group.

"For that economic climate, it was an amazing experience," she said.

The University of Illinois College of Law provided Belloff many clinical opportunities and because she enjoyed and excelled at it, she assumed that her calling was litigation. She didn't have any experience with transactional work until her apprenticeship.

Along with Belloff, Much, Shelist has also kept its most recent apprentice, Melisande C. Loeppert, and hired her as a full-time associate. Loeppert started her apprenticeship last year in February. Peter A. Shepard is the firm's apprentice this year.

When it comes to the program cost, Roth said he feels the investment in an apprenticeship program is likely similar to a summer associate program but with longer term outcomes.

Summer associate programs are typically eight to 10 weeks, which Roth said doesn't offer enough time for the firm and associates to learn about each other. With the yearlong apprenticeship, the lawyers can watch cases and deals develop and, in some instances, see them



Jennifer G. Gallinson

through to the end.

Apprentices receive a lower starting salary and still bill clients for their work without the hourly requirement pressure. The firm wouldn't release salary figures, but apprentices earn about 20 percent less than first-year associates.

"We haven't lost money. At most, we broke even. If we have lost money it's negligible," Roth said. "The experience for both sides is well worth it."

Having the next generation of attorneys contributes to the firm's culture as well.

For instance, Belloff serves on its associates committee and interviewed people in the office about their work spaces. After she learned that a lot of staff had back problems, the firm installed some stand-up workstations and desk treadmills that allow for walking and working at the same time.

The future of the apprenticeship program, Roth said, will be determined by the firm's workload and the economy.

"I'm hoping the economy continues to gain strength and our profession gets back to where young professionals are excited about going to law school," Roth said. "It's a good profession and I'm hoping this program helps just a little bit."