

The Importance of Law School Grades

By: Vanessa Vidal

The importance of law school grades was highlighted by the American Lawyer story of Loren Friedman, a lawyer who altered his law school transcripts to get a summer associate position at Sidley Austin in Chicago.

Friedman altered his University of Chicago Law School transcripts when he applied to be a summer associate at Sidley in 2001. Sadly, Friedman knew his real grades wouldn't get him into Sidley; so he faked his transcripts, altering every completed grade and changing C's to B's by whiting out the real grades and typing in new ones. Why did Friedman take such a risk? He did not think he could land a job at a big law firm without the big grades.

Were his grade assumptions correct? You bet. John Levi, a Sidley partner who helps supervise recruiting, testified that there was "no way in the world" Sidley would have extended Friedman an offer if they'd known his real grades. (The firm's numerical grade cutoff for Chicago students is around 77, Levi testified.)

Friedman was hired by Sidley as a summer associate. He impressed the partners at the firm and was offered a full-time spot. He declined his offer, choosing instead to clerk for a federal bankruptcy judge. How impressed was Sidley by Friedman's performance? Apparently, quite a bit. Sidley decided to roll over Friedman's offer over for a year!

Clearly, Friedman was wrong in altering his transcripts, but what about Sidley's grade requirements? Law firms rely heavily on law schools grades to determine which law students will make the best attorneys, and in almost every instance to decide whom they will be hiring as summer associates. The basic problem when hiring candidates out of law schools is the lack of data available to help firms gauge whether the candidate will be a strong performer. Law school grades are easy proxies to use.

However, as this story illustrates, law school grades are not always good predictors of performance. Yet, many law firms continue to enforce rigid grade policies. Sometimes the strict enforcement of these policies have the effect of stripping reason from the process.

When Friedman's resume ended up in the hands of Michael Sweeney, a partner at Sidley, nearly five years later, Sweeney's first response was to ask Levi how someone with Friedman's grades got in the door at Sidley. I may have wondered how someone who did not make the rigid "77 grade cut-off" ended up making such a good impression as to be getting an offer from Sidley – one that was extended for a year!

While there was "no way in the world" Friedman would have made it into Sidley by his grades alone, according to the firm's recruiting partner's own words, Friedman was nevertheless impressive enough in every other respect as to get an offer from the prestigious firm. Surprisingly Sidley had little to say about that.

Are Law School Grades Predictive of Future Performance?

Conventional wisdom would indicate that law school grades don't really matter after you've gotten a job following your summer internship. But law firm practices suggest otherwise, despite the fact that law firm grades have proven to be arbitrary and often unreliable indicators of performance – this case in point.

Traditionally, big law firms remain very attached to their grade requirements, and transcripts have an impact on not only the hiring of summer associates, but lateral associates as well. When an attorney has been practicing for a number of years and has a track record of performance, how important are grades? The answer varies, but most big law firms still take law school grades very seriously. Moreover, in a down market, the scrutiny given to law schools grades becomes even more heightened.

What about in-house? Companies hiring attorneys in-house generally tend to have more flexible requirements when it comes to academics. First of all, most law departments do not hire attorneys right out of law school, but rather experienced attorneys who have a track record of performance. Secondly, companies tend to be more interested in a candidate's practical legal skills and abilities – in other words they are looking for lawyers that can do the job and do it well, whether they graduated from Cardozo or Yale, and earned A's or C's. It is a case where performance takes precedence over academics. Could companies have it right?

Law school rank and GPA have been shown to only be moderately predictive of success. This theory was tested in a study conducted about a year ago where the performance of more than 1,300 law firm associates was tested. One of the study's authors, Ron Paquette, told the ABA Journal that "The Harvard attorneys did not perform any better than those at the 30th-ranked law school." The study simply showed that those with top grades were not much more likely to succeed than those with simply good grades.

If law school grades are not good predictors of performance, when do they no longer matter?

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