

LAW WEEK COLORADO

Casting a Wider Net

Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell's summer program is part of a plan to hire more fresh grads

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On-campus interviews are underway at many law schools, and although the semester recently started, students are already thinking about how they want to spend next summer.

Facing fierce competition from firms with more established summer associate programs, the recruitment team at Denver's Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell has had to tailor its pitch for attracting the best and brightest.

"If you're a law student who really has a passion for mock trial, who really has a passion to stand up and present your client's position, whether to a judge or to a jury, if you have a need for the adrenaline rush that those things give you in this profession — well, we offer that in spades," said Andrew Unthank, partner and recruiting chair at WTO.

The firm just finished its inaugural summer program with a sole summer law clerk. It

is now interviewing law students and plans to select one to three 2Ls for next summer's program.

Although the firm is focusing its on-campus interview efforts locally right now, it hopes to eventually target law schools around the country to recruit future summer law clerks.

SUPERSTARS WANTED

WTO's new summer clerkship is part of a strategy to hire more associates straight from law school.

The boutique civil litigation firm has typically filled its ranks with hires from the lateral market — either junior associates at other local and national firms or law school graduates who have completed a judicial clerkship. The recruitment strategy made sense because of the high level of responsibility the firm's associates take on and the complexity of the trial work the firm handles.

However, the firm's steady growth — along

with the fact that law school applications are down nationwide — has led WTO to consider other sources to fill its hiring pipeline. Unthank said that when he started at the firm in 2006, there were only about 30 attorneys. Now that number has grown to around 100.

Along with the firm's growing size has been a growing awareness that at least some new graduates are capable of stepping into an associate role.

"We've committed to hiring folks right out of law school, assuming that they show that they are the sort of superstar future trial lawyer that we're looking for," Unthank said.

Unthank said that as the firm shifts toward hiring more associates fresh out of law school, they will still be expected to do the same challenging work its associates have handled in the past. The summer clerkship program is intended to give potential hires the experience they need so they can hit the ground running if they return as associates.

"We want to make sure they have an opportunity to get at least some exposure to that type of work before we throw them into the deep end," Unthank said.

DIVERSITY AND MENTORSHIP

Unthank said that after the firm interviewed a number of CU Law students a couple years ago for an academic-year internship, WTO realized it might be missing out on a lot of high-quality candidates coming out of the state's law schools.

The internship program served as the firm's foray into working with law students, followed by the pilot summer clerkship this past summer. The firm partnered with the Colorado Pledge to Diversity, now in its 20th year, to hire one 1L student last spring for the summer clerkship program. WTO plans to hire another 1L through the program for next summer's clerkship.

The Colorado Pledge to Diversity Summer Clerkship Program matches law students from underrepresented groups at CU, The University of Denver and the University of Wyoming with participating law firms and legal departments for a summer.

In addition to offering an easy avenue for recruitment — the program manages the hiring process for participating firms — the Pledge to Diversity aligns with another of the firm's goals in hiring more recent law school grads.

"One of our goals with expanding our recruiting to the law school ranks is to also drive more diversity in our pipeline. We're seeing more diverse candidates who are on our radar who we're interested in hiring," Unthank said.

"We recognize that, oftentimes, the law schools have the richest diverse population before people start to spread out and follow their own individual paths elsewhere."

Summer clerks at WTO will focus mostly on research and writing assignments, but they are also encouraged to go to court and observe senior attorneys at trial. Unthank hopes this can help demystify a process that law students are often nervous about.

Summer law clerks will be assigned one associate mentor and one partner mentor, mirroring the firm's two-tier mentorship system for associates. Partner mentors are tasked with providing professional development advice and starting conversations about an associate or summer clerk's career goals.

FINDING AND KEEPING

In addition to exploring new talent pools, WTO has shaken up its interview and retention processes for associates.

To improve hiring decisions, the firm looked at data from a nationwide survey conducted in 2016 by the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System. In its Foundations for Practice study, IAALS asked 24,000 law firm partners — including about two-thirds of WTO's partners — about what makes a new attorney successful.

According to the survey, more than 96% of WTO partners responded that a strong moral compass, teamwork and commitment to excellence are necessary for success, compared with a national average of 79.2%, 72.9% and 61.3% for those qualities, respectively.

"What we did is we took these survey results and then we married them to a behavioral-based interviewing process," Unthank said.

The firm's interviews for new associates are now designed to identify and select for the qualities the firm's partners value most.

Unthank said that over the past year, WTO has also spent a lot of time focused on keeping associates at the firm once they're in the door by increasing feedback between associates and management and implementing more transparency in how bonuses are awarded. •

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