

What Can Your Teenager Do to Work for Your Law Firm?

A May 2010 discussion on SoloSez, the email listserv for general practice, solo and small firm lawyers

My older daughter (13.5 yo) has tentatively expressed interest in doing some work for my firm. It's more likely a combination of a desire to earn money and a distaste for babysitting (she does that quite a bit for her younger cousins and I think she's kind of tired of it).

I know that some of you have hired your kids to help out with your practices. What kinds of tasks have you delegated, and for what ages? Any rules put in place?

It is possible that I will use responses in a blog post or side bar of Solo by Choice - and I am happy to give attribution and links to your website for good responses. At the same time, if you want to remain anonymous or don't want me to write about your answer at all, that's fine too - just let me know.

My daughter did copying, and organized files, entered info into my data base, learned to enter date for accountings (around age 16) She started answering phones around age 15, and got a job at 19 at a talent agency (they

thought she was 23) by telling them she had five years experience at a law office she put her title as executive assistant LOL, any way she came home and told me she told her boss he needed to use the real names not the fake one on contracts she knew since she worked in a law office his superior was very impressed. I was too, I thought she spent most of her time goofing off. Your daughter will drive you crazy, but it was fun.

Martha Jo Patterson, California

I'm considering hiring my assistant's 13 year old to do some things. Here is what I have considered:

- scanning any remaining paper files
- shredding said files (or the parts that can be shredded)
- misc office errands (delivering envelopes that we now hire a courier for, picking up office supplies, etc)
- preparing client packages (i.e. prep documents that go in folders for seminars, intro packages, etc - do all but the customized letter)
- prep and mailing of newsletter and any "form" letters to clients (with supervision obviously)

Pretty much just the admin stuff, although I will have to train them well on scanning files and saving them properly.

Michele Allinotte, Canada

I think Michelle's list is good. When I was 14, I was an intern in a freshman state representative's office three afternoons a week. I typed constituent letters. In those days, we had to type each one on the Selectric, so there was a lot of it to be done. By 15, I graduated to constit letters and filing the legislative updates (probably where I became dependent on color coding, because that's how the Mich legislature did it.) I couldn't drive yet, but I did run tons of errands downtown.

It was a great experience for me, free labor for them, and, because Michigan's economy circa 1982 was the same as now, it gave me a HUGE advantage over my peers.

And the rookie state Rep? She's now U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow!

Lisa Babcock

Forgot to mention I may also get her to do some social media stuff - getting me listed, providing articles to directories, posting links, etc. Her mom does that now but if I could free up her time to do billable work, all the better!

Also, I was at the Solo & Small Firm Conference in Toronto on Thurs eve and Friday and one of the discussions I had with people is that law students are graduating having never had a job in their lives. I think that is a real disservice to kids. I had a job from 8 years old onwards (I was too young for a paper route so my brother got two and we split the work and the cash). So, long story short, kudos to you for raising a kid who is expressing an interest in working at such a young age!

Michele Allinotte

Well, she is not expressing a lot of interest voluntarily. But she wants things that I will not buy and needs to find a way to earn money for them since mom and dad aren't going to pay.

I do agree with you about the importance of working. I spent so much time working in dish rooms and food service that the "grunt" work of law practice - accounting, admin and marketing - is a step up. Unfortunately, today's

academic system penalizes students who work at menial jobs. Students are expected to do community service (for free) or have their parents "pay" for programs to work in laboratories or take courses in remote locations. When it comes time to apply for college, whose resume looks better - the kid who worked at McDonalds or the kid who worked (for free) at an internship teaching English in Japan or at a lab. Personally, I value the menial labor (or someone who works at the free internships and menial jobs on the side or is an entrepreneur). But colleges do not and that it a shame.

Carolyn Elefant, District of Columbia

Katie worked in my office when it was a three-person firm w/o staff. I don't recall whether it was summer or school-year work. She made trips to the courthouse to check our folder for filed docs and to do the filing, she answered phones, copied, etc. She was old enough to drive (which 15 here) so was old enough to get the concept of confidentiality.

It's good training for kids to learn the basics, for example and I'm surprised and dismayed that one even has to consider it training, learning how to dress for working in a professional office.

CJ Stevens, Montana

I am also planning to have my 16-year old do admin work for me. In addition to having my daughter earn her own money and learn office skills, there are tax benefits if you are a sole prop. I don't claim to completely understand them, but my accountant advised that if you

are a sole prop and hire your minor children you save on FICA and FUTA taxes. I think you get an exemption from withholding those taxes from your child's paycheck as well as not having to pay the employer portion -- so it can be cheaper to hire your own kids than a non-relative -- assuming you have a reliable teen. I'm sure one of the tax gurus on the listserv can explain it much better than I can.

Laura Ferree, California

Growing up, I worked in my mom's CPA firm all the time. When I was younger, I got started on filing the client files - this was back before paperless offices and scanning. I worked in the big file room most of the time. And cleaning offices. As I got older, I got to start processing the returns - ie making copies and putting the client instructions on the forms. When I could drive, I got the job of office courier. Eventually, I got to where I was doing write-up work - entering transactions into the database. When I was in college and law school, I worked part-time doing the job of a staff accountant. While waiting on my bar results, before opening my own law firm, I worked for her full time. At some point while I was in high school, I also did her first website.

For law firms, I could see teenagers doing much of the same work. You can start them with administrative stuff - scanning, courier, ordering office supplies, etc. If they do that well, you may even get them to do some marketing type stuff. And remember that they probably know computers better

than you, so let them help with your IT problems.

Some good rules for the new teenager-employee:

1. Work has to be done at the office.
2. Before anything leaves the office as final product, you have to look at it.
3. Regular schedules.
4. Confidentiality and privilege - make sure to review these with her so you don't get in trouble.

Kimberly DeCarrera, Georgia

My son worked in my office during his high school years. His primary task was entering vendor bills into quickbooks, printing checks for me to sign, mailing the checks and filing the remains. He also did a lot of general filing, and made runs to the courthouse and to the bank. I do real estate closings, which once led to sending him to the bank with a quarter million dollars to deposit into trust, a memorable experience for him.

Rebecca K. Wiess, Washington

Bear in mind that any work that your child does for you is earned income for the child (assuming that you are paying a close-to-market wage). As a result, your child is eligible to make a contribution into an IRA. If you so desire, you could match your child's pay with a contribution into a Roth IRA. (There's no requirement that your kid use his/her money to fund the IRA - only that the kid has earned income.) That money could compound for 40 years or so to make a nice nest egg.

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Bob Striker, Minnesota

I think Bob has a great comment on starting a Roth IRA for your child employee. This money will really add up for your children. Any amount will be beneficial, and may even have some tax breaks for your. Something to speak with your accountant about.

Understanding confidentiality is very important, but I think overall the parent, deep down inside, will know what the child is capable of doing at the law firm. Since my step-kids are not on this list I can say that I would hire my 14 yr old before I would hire my 18 1/2 yr old. Love them both, but one would be a better employee than the other.

Phil A. Taylor, Massachusetts

I like it. I am of the opinion that, in branding, its not the name that matters, its what you do with it. ... and its better than

TaxZoom.

Brian Elliott, Georgia and Nevada

Are there any regulations concerning the firm's name from your state bar association?

Here, in Connecticut, there are MANY regulations as to what you can name your law firm. Here are some examples of what is frowned upon, or flat-out not allowed: using "and associates" when there are no actual associates, using names that make your practice appear larger or more specialized, and tradenames (similar to yours there) if the principal and owner of the practice's name is not front and center.

If it's allowed in CA (which it probably is, since everyone knows CT is a little slow and behind the times) then I like it. It sounds serious and professional and somehow, old and established. (all good things)

Best of luck!

Metta Delmore, Connecticut

I dislike it. A lot.

I realize that what eyechart is trying to do is come up with a name that signifies he works both Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. But what, and where, is San Angeles? It sounds as if it's in GSOT. '-)

Regardless, it's confusing, not helpful.

Sorry, eyechart, but I know you wouldn't love me as much if I didn't tell you what I really thought. '-)

James S. Tyre, California