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HEADLINE: Law vs. a life: Stanford students seek reforms at major law firms

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BODY:

Seeing ahead of them a work life potentially centered on accumulating billable hours to the detriment of their personal lives, more than 100 students from some top U.S. law schools want to change the way law is practiced at major firms.

Andrew Canter, in his second year at Stanford Law School, formed Law Students Building a Better Legal Profession, along with third-year student Craig Holt Segall.

The group recently sent letters to 100 top law firms outlining their ideas for making the practice of law a less-crushing task for new associates.

In the letter to law firm recruiters and hiring partners, the organization explains that its principles revolve around four core themes to which they seek commitment:

- * Making concrete steps towards a transactional billing system.
- * Reducing maximum billable hour expectations for partnership.
- * Implementing balanced hours policies that work.
- * Making work expectations clear.

Canter said that about a year ago he and other students started looking at their options in the legal profession.

"The more we learned, the more we saw these huge issues about billable hours and the problems that billable-hour escalation has caused for attorneys trying to live balanced lives, and even for law firms who are seeing very high attrition rates of their associates," he said.

In a recent survey, the National Association of Law Placement reported that about 37 percent of associates leave large law firms within the first three years, with about 77 percent leaving within five years, a substantial increase from recent years.

Canter said discussions with attorneys at some law firms revealed that they have moved to transactional models of billing, a type of flat-fee pricing for legal services.

He said the group understands that this would not work for every type of case right now, but it would like to start a movement in that direction.

He said law students interviewing for job offers could also express a preference for firms that use systems other than the billable hour.

Canter said no single event served as a catalyst for the group's formation but that the recent jump in first-year salaries to \$160,000 or more at some top firms caused concern.

"It results in more hours for associates," he said.

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Ironically, some firms say they have to pay more to stem the tide of associate attrition, which seems to be attributable at least in part to burnout over unrealistic billable hour expectations, Carter said.

"The solution was to kind of throw more money at it, which makes the root issue more challenging for attorneys," he said.

Canter said his group totals about 125 currently but that hopes to expand to more schools as time and money allow for travel.

The idea is not to try to force law firms to change, he said.

"We really are about letting students be in the position to make the best decisions," Canter said.

He acknowledged that the organization has heard back from only a few law firms thus far.

This article originally appeared in The Journal Record of Oklahoma City, another Dolan Media publication.

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