

THE VALUE OF HIRING YOUTH: Please Allow Me to Brag About My Staff by Vanessa Frank

-- Originally published in the Ventura County Bar Association magazine *Citations* in March 2019

In ten years of solo practice, I have had eight regular paralegals, along with another seven interns and researchers. When you put it that way, it sounds like a disaster. Perhaps **someone** is not so fun to work for?? I'm sure you're not thinking **I'm** the reason!

Doubters be damned. My staff turns over because that is the plan. We hire folks who are young – often still in college or even high school – and provide them with an early professional experience. Often on the date of hire, I also find out their date of termination, as they have plans to enroll in college or graduate school in the near future.

Nearly all of my staff have been immigrants or the children of immigrants, and while this may not be surprising (I am an immigration lawyer, after all), it is not just the pull factor of my practice area that draws such employees to me. I also make the effort to recruit young people who may not have grown up with ready access to a professional career track. I have worked with professors and counselors at our local universities and colleges and they will often refer ambitious people to me.

A small or solo practice can make a huge impact on the career trajectory of young people.

Many young people who are first in their families to achieve high school diploma or attend college have no practical experience working in a professional environment. Everything from answering the phone with a smile in your voice, to knowing how to set your own reasonable work expectations and meet them is novel. Here in Ventura County, immigrant and first-generation youth often look to fast food and mall related retail for their work experience. So many kids work at Metro PCS, it's almost a high school unto itself. Kids do get some solid customer-service skills in these jobs. But there is no room for professional growth at Metro PCS and thus, there is no training or emphasis placed on improving leadership skills: how to set a meeting, how to break a large project into smaller pieces, how to get your boss's attention on behalf of a client who is driving you crazy.

Of course, hiring first-generation and immigrant youth as staff in my particular practice also benefits me – my staff often have first hand knowledge of experiences similar to those of our clients. So, while it may take me some extra time to explain what a “conformed copy” is, I don't have to explain why it's important to ask for precise details about how a person crossed the border.

Where do I find these folks? Well, speaking at our local colleges and universities has helped me meet professors and counselors, as well as students themselves. I get lots of résumés. I look for the person who not only drops me an email with their résumé but also follows-up, advocates to get a meeting with me and timely responses to my requests. If they show up on time, prepared and ready to talk about their experience and goals, we are more than halfway there. And since there is always more to do around the office than time to do it, we can be flexible about what work the staffer will do and what their schedule will be, fitting it around class schedules or a second job. Some prefer to do more clerical and practical things, others are more interested in delving into the narratives of our clients and developing community outreach materials.

Beyond getting the work done, however, are the connections my staff make which can lead them into their professional career. I have staff alumni working in major international law firms, as well as smaller local firms. Several have gone to law school, others have pursued advanced degrees and administer non-profit or university programs. We always make sure their resumes sparkle with the range of advocacy, research, writing and managerial experience they gain at my office so that when they take the next step, they are ahead of the pack. And having my staff alumni succeed also helps me succeed. To paraphrase Vidal Sassoon, “if they look good, I look good.”