



STOP: This neighbourhood draws the brightest young lawyers, and pays them handsomely. But for some, it asks for more than they can give.

Bay Street lawyer blues

It's where top law students are supposed to want to end up. But many wonder if in coming here, they took a wrong turn.

BY CAMERON AINSWORTH-VINCZE

It's nearing 10 p.m. one humid evening in late August when Debbie answers her office phone. We've exchanged nearly a dozen emails and voice messages in the span of a week, trying to find a time for us to discuss her life as a first-year associate on Bay Street. I've reminded her that our talk will be brief: 15 minutes, 20 at most. As soon as she picks up, it's clear that I've caught her at a bad time. Her words are abrupt, her language laden with cursing and papers are heard rustling in the background. We reschedule, again, allowing her to return to another late evening. "I'm going to be here all night," she says. "Sometimes I really hate my job. You can quote me on that."

Debbie (not her real name; all names of associates in this article have been changed) is about to complete her first full year in corporate law at a large, downtown Toronto law firm. On a busy day, she bills between 10 to 15 hours, depending on how many files she has on the go and how much work she receives from those above her. But billable hours, the measure of lawyerly output at a firm, don't come close to covering the total amount of time she spends in the office. She estimates that for every eight hours billed, she is actually at work for 10. In an average week, she usually bills around 45 hours and is in the office for about 60. Her target at the end of the year—as is the standard for most first-year

associates working on Bay Street—is around 1,700 billable hours. To reach that goal Debbie often works weekends. From January to March this past year she worked parts of every weekend, except two.

Although Debbie enjoys the work and points out that it is "insane how much I have learned in the past year," this wasn't exactly her ideal career path when she entered law school. "I, like everyone else who goes to law school, thinks they're totally not going to Bay Street." Debbie wanted to be a social justice lawyer and do "good things for the world," she adds, but felt intimidated talking in front of people and wasn't keen on the adversarial atmosphere of the courtroom.

Bay Street, in contrast, presented a vast array of opportunities, including exposure to different aspects of the law, an abundance of training and articling positions, and, of course, a very handsome salary once she became an associate. This past year, Debbie earned roughly \$95,000 for her efforts. "We get paid very well. It's not entry level," she says. "I do remind myself when I am working long, hard hours that I am being compensated for it."

So are her colleagues on Bay Street. According to figures provided by ZSA Legal Recruit-

ment, a national recruitment firm, first-year associates at large Toronto firms can expect to take home \$90,000 to \$105,000, plus annual bonuses of up to 30 per cent. (See accompanying table, p. 60.) Most of those first-years pulling down this kind of money are, like Debbie, still in their 20s. And those high starting salaries are on an upward escalator. By the third year, compensation jumps to between \$110,000 and \$127,000, plus bonuses. By the fifth year, it's \$130,000 to \$190,000. Make partner a few years later, and you could be pulling in double or triple that amount.

TOM SOMETIMES ARRIVES AT THE OFFICE AS EARLY AS 5 A.M., AND OFTEN HAS TIME FOR LITTLE ELSE. IN A BUSY WEEK, HE CAN WORK UP TO 100 HOURS.

That's clearly part of Bay Street's attraction. Compensation is well above the average, even for lawyers. According to ZSA, associates at large firms in Ottawa or Edmonton are paid \$40,000 to \$70,000. Lawyers at small firms in those two cities may earn as little as \$30,000. And in Atlantic Canada, associates at large firms make less than \$50,000 in their first year.

But money isn't the only reason Debbie is working on Bay Street. She says that she is gaining valuable experience, has a great working relationship with most of the people in her office and, above all, finds the work to be interesting most of the time. "That's an important thing in a career because you're going to be doing it for however many years," says Debbie. Yet there is one major drawback of the job that she is having difficulties with—a lack of control over her personal life. "I can make plans and try to organize my week in a certain way but everything can change in a day, in an hour," she says. "If things need to get done urgently, it means plans are changed at the drop of a hat and staying until midnight to work."

That lack of control is echoed among lawyers across this country. According to a 2005 survey of more than 1,400 lawyers released by Catalyst, a research and advisory group formed to support the advancement of women, 84 per cent of women lawyers and 66 per cent of men said they would move to another firm if it offered an environment more supportive of family and personal commitments. The study also found that 81 per cent of women and 67 per cent of men would jump ship to have more control over their work schedules. And while 44 per cent of women said they would move to another firm for greater advancement oppor-

tunities, a far greater number, 66 per cent, said they'd switch firms if it allowed them to work fewer hours. (Men, in contrast, were equally likely to choose between moving for career reasons and moving to reduce their hours.)

For Karen, a mid-level associate who has worked for two Bay Street firms since graduating from law school, that lack of control, along with other negative experiences, has become too much. She's leaving Bay Street for the public sector. "I have come to realize that I just don't like working in a law firm,"

she says over the phone while driving in rush-hour traffic. "I don't like the billable hours structure. I find it extremely stifling... and so claustrophobic." Karen enjoyed her articling year—the training year that all Canadian lawyers undergo between finish-

ing law school and being accepted as a full-fledged lawyer—but everything changed once she was hired on as an associate. "The competition aspect of it kicked into high gear once we became associates. Then you really had to prove yourself."

What Karen says she encountered was a cutthroat work environment and a job that demanded long hours. She also felt pressured to continually endear herself to certain senior staff members. "I'm not very good at the politics of working in a firm. It's a skill that you really have to learn," she says. Midway through her second year it became evident that she wasn't a proper fit with the firm, and they mutually agreed that it was best for her to leave.

Karen's second job on Bay Street has unfortunately proven to be just as unsatisfying as the first. This time around the most difficult hurdle has been her dealings with one particular colleague. "She has been so miserable to me since the day I started and has been undermining my work, been competitive about the files that have come in, and I know has never hesitated in giving negative feedback about me to the other lawyers," she says. "It is a big part of why I'm leaving." Karen hopes a job in the public sector will mean a little more flexibility for her lifestyle, and a more supportive atmosphere. "That is my priority, along with not spending 99 per cent of my time at the office."

Yet Karen still believes that starting out at a big firm is not a bad move for any young lawyer. She just wishes she had taken the time to research her options to understand what the firm's expectations were before she started. "I went into it pretty blindly," she says. "I hope that going back to the public sector will allow me to enjoy my work again."

Master in Progress:

Salima is a communications manager working in healthcare. From 2000 to 2003, she challenged herself to work full-time while advancing her education through the University of Alberta's Master of Arts in Communications and Technology (mact) program.

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WALK: Most lawyers say they'd switch firms to one more supportive of a personal life

Tom: "Get the hell out. But do it sensibly."

To help students avoid ending up in a gilded cage, many Canadian law schools are providing more support than ever before. Students enrolled in one of Ontario's six law schools, and in many others across Canada, now have access to extensive career service offices. "Prior to 1997 it didn't exist," says Gina Alexandris, assistant dean of student services at York University's Osgoode Hall. "Now students coming through law school don't know life at law school without the advice and guidance of the career services office." Such resources provide students with an overview of each law firm. In addition, the universities schedule information sessions and events where lawyers visit the campus to discuss their respective practices. In the past couple of years,

Osgoode Hall has also incorporated wellness issues in its offerings to help students form positive habits that they can adopt in their careers. And students are reminded that it's not a good idea to simply choose the career path with the great-

est financial reward. "We have conversations with students and tell them that if money is the only motivator, than it's the wrong reason to make that decision," says Alexandris. But she adds that Bay Street jobs are still in high demand for reasons other than money. "There is an excitement about the work and the quality of work that they [students] perceive to be available at a Bay Street firm," she says. "It's an opportunity to really hone their skills and further their career."

John Starzynski, volunteer executive director of the Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program, which helps students, judges and lawyers with work-related issues, encourages associates to discuss a prospective firm's expectations, right from the outset. "Get it right up front because I think what happens with a lot of people is that if they don't ask, they presume," he says. "You'll find out pretty quickly if you are a match for the firm." And once a student becomes an associate, Starzynski adds that little things like eating well, exercising two or three times a week and getting eight hours of sleep every night will go a long way in helping a person remain on an even keel.

Yet no matter what avenue a young lawyer chooses and how much they try to balance their lives, Krieger says it all comes back to one basic principle: "No matter what you do, just make sure you enjoy it most of the time. Otherwise you'll turn 65 and look back at your life with a ton of regret." ■

Lawrence Krieger, a law professor at Florida State University and a researcher on the values and well-being of law students and lawyers, believes the problems that many young lawyers encounter stem from the adversarial nature of law school. Students are indoctrinated with the idea that the best jobs are those that are the most competitive, namely those with large, high-paying firms. "It's kind of an institutionalized insanity, and everybody has decided to think this way," he says. "It's great to have money, luxuries and a nice house, but it will not make you happy." Statistics suggest that Krieger may be on to something. A 1990 Johns Hopkins study found that out of 104 occupational groups in the U.S., lawyers ranked highest in major depressive disorder. They also ranked fifth in incidences of suicide, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and in other studies show five to 15 times the normal rate of clinical psychological distress. Krieger also says that high levels of alcoholism and substance abuse exist within the profession.

To avoid such a fate, Krieger believes that smaller firms, legal services and government jobs are better opportunities for many lawyers because they honour an individual's need to live a balanced life. For those uncertain as to whether or not they need to reconsider their career choice, Krieger offers a very simple test. "If you're in a job that at the end of the day you don't feel good about, and you wake up not feeling good, you need to find out why. Don't ignore it."

For Tom, a second-year associate on Bay Street, that realization is starting to set in. When he entered law school his goal was to pursue a career in academia, or drafting government policy. But then his mindset changed. "You come to a point where you have a lot of

'IT'S INSTITUTIONALIZED INSANITY,' SAYS A PROFESSOR CRITICAL OF FIRM CULTURE. 'AND EVERYBODY HAS DECIDED TO THINK THIS WAY.'

debt. So this is a very quick way of erasing that debt, and it was my primary decision for taking the job." Now he sometimes arrives at the office as early as 5 a.m., and often has little time for anything besides work. In a busy week, Tom says he works up to 100 hours—the equivalent of more than 14 hours a day, seven days a week. "At the end of the day, I don't know if I'm cut out for it," he says. "My values have changed since when I first started." Krieger's message for

WHAT THEY EARN ON BAY STREET

Lawyers at the leading firms are very well compensated. Below are salary ranges for first- to sixth-year associates, provided by ZSA Legal Recruitment. Figures do not include bonuses—which run up to 30 per cent per year.

