

My First Steps

Summary and Reflections on an internship with:  
Brandon, Schmidt, Goffinet, and Solverson

By

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### **About The Firm\***

My internship took place at the law offices of Brandon, Schmidt, Goffinet, and Solverson on the west side of Carbondale. The firm consists of the four partners before listed, and two other practicing lawyers: Michelle Schaeffer and Kent Owens. Also, the firm employs several secretaries and four law clerks that attend SIU's own law school. The firm focuses on litigation handling its fair share of depositions and trials during the year. Despite its small nature the firm represents clients from all over Southern Illinois stretching near the St. Louis area. The firm mainly handles clients such as insurance companies and doctors with some exception.

\* Mr. Jeffrey A. Goffinet who is one of the partners provided the information about the firm for the purposes of this paper.

## MY FIRST STEPS

Doing an internship has become a necessity in almost any career field one chooses today, and a vital tool in making career decisions. Thus as my senior year approached, I decided that doing an internship with a law firm would be in my best interest. Why with a law firm? The obvious answer would be because I am interested in the legal profession. Yes, I am interested in the legal profession, but I did this to take that interest to a new level. The last four years of my life I have thought that the law would be my career, but I have not actually had any experience with the law. Now just two semesters from finishing my undergraduate degree, the time for thinking is over and the time for taking action is here. The only way I felt I could know if the law was right for me or not was to try my hand at it with this internship. The law offices of Brandon, Schmidt, Goffinet, and Solverson took me on as an intern to work directly under Mr. Jeffrey A. Goffinet. Over the course of eight weeks I had the opportunity to experience several aspects of attorney life with the firm. What occupies the next several pages of this paper is a chronicle, week by week, of my experience with this internship. "My First Steps," as I like to refer to the experience, came to an end all too fast, but will hopefully propel me on the right path.

I began my internship with the usual first day activities that one would encounter with any new job. I took a tour of the offices of Brandon, Schmidt, Goffinet, and Solverson, and found them to be nice, especially given the small nature of the firm. Also, Mr. Goffinet took the time to introduce me to the four clerks who work in the office. These clerks are all law students at SIUC, giving them more experience than me in the field, and they are paid employees of the firm, whereas I am not.

During the first week my work was limited to finding medical bills in files and summarizing them. My first impression of the task was that it was merely busy work to acclimate me to the job. However, Mr. Goffinet quickly dropped a memorandum in my work bin to indicate the importance of the tasks I was doing. He assured me that by summarizing the medical costs in the files I saved him about two hours of work per day, because he uses the summaries to build a line of questioning during depositions.

After the first week I took two impressions away from the work I had done and had been assigned to do. First, no matter how trivial the tasks I am doing may seem, they always have some importance or Mr. Goffinet would not have me do them. Second, one important aspect of being an attorney will be to learn to deal with the tremendous amount of tedious paperwork involved in the job. I learned both these lessons, especially the second one, after going through massive files just to find medical bills. At this point, very early in my work, my expectations have been fulfilled by the internship. I did not expect to do anything too amazing, but did expect to be doing a lot of tedious work to support Mr. Goffinet's projects. I also spent a lot of time in this first week trying to understand exactly what would be expected of me and how to handle myself in the office. Thus, my first week as an intern was a lot of fumbling around trying to catch on, a lot of what must have sounded like stupid questions, and a lot of excitement with this new challenge.

As I entered the office on Monday for week number two of my internship, I noticed a large pile of work near my area. Sure enough, my name was on all of the files, and for the first time since I had started I was intimidated by the workload. Obviously, these files were not anything that had to be done immediately, but I did feel some sense

of urgency to prove myself in the situation. Among the files were three large cases that needed medical costs summarized, which was not anything new to me at that point. After I sorted through the first three files, on Monday and Tuesday, I came across a new type of assignment. Mr. Goffinet had asked me to summarize a deposition for him, which is the regular duty of the four clerks, so I could not help but see this as a step up for me. The process of summarizing a deposition involves reading over a deposition, usually about forty-five pages long, and pulling out page by page the key answers given by those being deposed. As I mentioned before, the clerks perform this task almost daily, so I decided to ask one of them for guidance on the assignment. He told me the basic format of the summary, which consists of putting every question and answer on a page into a first person narrative. For example, if the situation consists of a car accident and subsequent injuries then I would write the summary out so the deposed tells a story from the start of the accident through the medical treatment, until the questioning stops.

For me week two was the time when I felt myself assimilating into the office style and atmosphere. The work I did seemed to be more important to Mr. Goffinet than what I had done the first week, and the work was on a higher level than what I had done before. As I reflected on this week, I felt better about my contributions to the firm, and also felt that I had truly learned some of the elements of attorney work.

Monday June 23<sup>rd</sup> saw the start of week number three, and I began the week staring at another large pile of files to go through. By the end of week two I had finished summarizing the deposition for Mr. Goffinet, so now I had to wade through the rest of my stack. On the first two days of week three I spent my time mostly on summarizing medical profiles of clients involved in certain cases. This was a fairly easy task to do as

it only involved a brief profile of a client's medical history after an accident of some kind. By mid-week I had two more depositions to summarize, both of which presented more length and challenge. The two depositions were on the same case, so for the first time I would have the opportunity to experience a lawyer other than Mr. Goffinet deposing a witness. Right away I noticed that Mr. Goffinet has a strict pattern of questioning that he uses for each deposition, and the other attorney's material I read did not have a pattern at all. This subtle variation in technique seems to make all the difference, and from my observations I concluded that Mr. Goffinet's questions are more thorough and pertinent. As the end of the week approached, my work on the depositions was about half way done, and Mr. Goffinet dropped a memorandum complimenting me on the work I had done on the depositions so far, which gave me a lot of confidence in what I was doing.

From the outset of week three I felt more comfortable with both my work and the office setting than I had been in the previous two weeks. I am involved in more conversations with clerks, secretaries, and a couple of the lawyers that work here. I am gaining little insights into what the legal field consists of just from listening to these people converse about their daily activities. At this point my work here has been enjoyable, and though I am not working on anything of major importance, I am learning some key lessons about little things. Two examples of little things I have learned both from my work and from my conversations with other employees at the firm occurred this week. First, during a conversation I had with a clerk, I mentioned how complicated researching appeared to be for lawyers, and he showed me how to find a court case if I needed to do so. Not a huge deal, but at least now I can make sense of something like

272 IL DEC 693 when I have to. Second, I had to make a copy of the revised Southern District Rules for Mr. Goffinet, and the revised edition looked the same as the old edition to me. Mr. Goffinet pointed out two or three small changes, and explained to me the importance of such subtle changes for an attorney. These little things, easily overlooked, will hopefully be useful to me as I enter law school and the legal profession.

The midway point of the summer semester was ushered in with week number four. The week picked up where week three had left off with me still summarizing some depositions for Mr. Goffinet. Seemingly I have fallen into the trap that most people who work are familiar with; you do something good once, and you can count on doing that something a hundred times. Thus, my work on depositions will probably occupy the majority of my remaining time here. This is not a complaint by any means, and actually I am really enjoying reading and summarizing the depositions. Mr. Goffinet's style of questions makes for easy reading, and I am gaining some valuable insight into the process just by reading his work. From what I have read of his work, and compared to the other lawyer whom I read in week three, I have concluded that Mr. Goffinet must be good at what he does. Summarizing depositions for Mr. Goffinet was the extent of my work in week number four; in fact, all my work to this point had been for Mr. Goffinet, with the only exception coming toward the end of the week. I received my first assignment from a lawyer other than Mr. Goffinet on Thursday July 3<sup>rd</sup> of week four. Mrs. Christy Solverson, one of the other partners at the firm, asked me to summarize a deposition for her. Summarizing a deposition is an assignment that I am becoming very familiar with, but still it was exciting to receive some work from another partner.

At the end of week four I stand half way through this experience, and am satisfied with the experience to this point. I suppose the best way to describe what has gone on to this point in the semester would be with the baby steps analogy. From the start of this internship I have been taking small, but significant, steps toward gaining a greater understanding of what makes up the legal profession. As I mentioned earlier, I am definitely satisfied with my work as intern so far. I cannot say I have been doing exactly what I would have expected, but then again, coming into the internship I was not exactly sure what to expect.

At the beginning of week five I feel quite comfortable with myself in the office environment, and even confident that I can tackle any of the tasks I am handed. I began the week finishing up the depositions I was working on during week four with the exception of the summary for Mrs. Solverson. Apparently her case reached an out-of-court settlement, so a deposition summary would not be necessary at all. By Wednesday I made it through all of the depositions in my work bin, and for the first time in a little while I could actually see the bottom of the bin. For the rest of the week I helped the clerks with some of their work, and I also got to spend some time reading over court cases. I did this to try to pick up on the language being used in the legal documents, which was not an easy task at all. I closed out the week with an empty bin for the first time all summer, so I felt a sense of accomplishment there.

The one word I would use to describe my feelings after week number five would be comfortable. The experience is now starting to become part of my daily routine, and the things I am doing work on are now familiar to me, so I feel confident in my performances. As mentioned earlier, this week allowed me the opportunity to try my

hand at reading through legal documents, which led me to believe that reading legal documents and understanding them may be the hardest task an attorney has. I am sure after a while the language becomes second nature, but for me some of those documents were in a foreign language. At the conclusion of week five I am still feeling satisfied with my role at the firm, with the experience as a whole, and honestly feel good about the prospect of a legal career.

Week number six started with a bin full of work much the same way my previous five weeks with the firm had started. My main concentration for the week would be to summarize another deposition for Mr. Goffinet. By this time I have Mr. Goffinet's pattern of questioning down, and before I even started summarizing the deposition I could tell you exactly what the content should be. My predictions are correct, as he followed his usual structure, but this deposition was not as long as the others I had to summarize, so I am done with it by Tuesday. The rest of the work in my bin was limited to a few medical bill summaries, something that I had not done in the past couple of weeks, and I made a copy of a couple of court cases. By Thursday my work was completed for the week once again, which I would attribute either to my working faster or to my being given less work. Also, I received an exciting memorandum from Mr. Goffinet inviting me to go to court with him on Monday July 21<sup>st</sup>. His secretary informed me that it would not be anything too extravagant, more of a routine visit, but nevertheless this seems like a good opportunity for me to learn a few things, so I accepted the invitation. I had to miss Friday due to an appointment with my doctor in the morning so my sixth week turned out to be a short one.

At the end of week number six I feel like my experience with this internship is winding down substantially even though I still have two weeks remaining. I am receiving work that can be processed quickly so I do not leave anything unfinished at the end of the semester. The summer term has flown by, especially in the last couple of weeks, and it seems that my time with the internship will be too short. However, I must say, once again, that to this point my experiences with the internship have only been good. So the closing of week six leaves me with a sense of excitement both for the opportunity to go to court next week and for the realization that in two weeks I will be one step closer to my goals.

Week number seven of my internship began with a trip to Williamson County Court House for my glimpse into the outside office work of an attorney. By Mr. Goffinet's own description this trip was merely to be a routine visit to the courthouse for him--not anything too time consuming or exciting. I was able to see two different cases while accompanying him to court. First, was a motion for continuance of a case until the plaintiff could find adequate legal representation. Apparently the case had been delayed for nearly six years due to various problems with legal representation for the plaintiff as indicated in court. The case only lasted five or ten minutes as Mr. Goffinet did not have any objections, so we moved to the next room quickly. The second scenario I sat in on was a motion to compel a case management conference. The motion to compel involved a short explanation of the scenario by the plaintiff's lawyer, and an explanation of why the defendant refused to answer the interrogatories set forth by the plaintiff. The purpose of the motion was to force the defendant to answer the interrogatories set forth by the plaintiff's lawyer. The case management situation involved a negotiation for a trial date

for the case in question. Mr. Goffinet explained that since the case involved so many depositions and extensive research into medical backgrounds, the trial date was very important. The further they could push this back the better case Mr. Goffinet could build to represent his client. Once again, the point Mr. Goffinet was driving at had to do with how the little, sometimes tedious, tasks of being an attorney make a huge difference and cannot be ignored. I spent the remainder of week number seven finishing up on some little things I had left in my work bin over the weekend. On Thursday I had an interesting conversation with one of the law clerks about some of his experiences during the course of law school. He gave me some interesting insight into the mock trial process, and told me a lot about the workload I could expect over the course of law school.

As the seventh week comes to a close my work has almost dwindled down to nothing as my time here is now limited to a few short days. This week brought with it a good experience with the trip to the courthouse. Even though Mr. Goffinet had mentioned earlier in the semester that he would probably take me along with him to court, I was a little surprised he did so. The days I have left in the office are indeed numbered, and my feelings are that this experience will be valuable down the road for me. As I close the book on week seven I cannot help but feel excited and nostalgic that next week will be my last.

Week eight began with only one simple file in my work bin, which did not surprise me, since the thought here is do not start on anything that cannot be finished within the week. On Monday I quickly summarized some medical bills and profiles for Mr. Goffinet to get that stuff out of the way. Also, I set up an appointment to have Mr.

Goffinet give me an evaluation of the work I have done here this summer. By the middle of the week I am basically done with everything that I needed to have done so I can now focus on writing this very paper.

The final day of my internship brings with it a few questions about what exactly I should take from my time here. Did this experience provide me with tools to succeed on the career path I have chosen? Looking at my work with the firm would probably lead one to say that while I learned some things they were not vast lessons. I would argue that point by simply agreeing with what Mr. Goffinet has pointed out to me. Every task that an attorney has, be it summarizing a deposition or going to court, takes place to serve an important purpose. Even though my work here may seem tedious and insignificant, it has been quite the opposite. Although I do not harbor any illusions that my work here was of grand importance, I do think that what I did for the firm, Mr. Goffinet in particular, helped to relieve some of the workload. In the end the main tool that this internship provided me with was the knowledge that, as an attorney, tedious so-called “busy work” will be normal, so I had better learn to deal with it now. I learned valuable little lessons that seem insignificant when viewing my career goals as a whole, but as with any profession little things must be learned too. Yes, this experience did provide me with some tools that will help me succeed along my career path.

Another question that comes to mind whenever one does an internship of this nature is; do I still want to do this for my career? In all honesty, when I started this internship my main fear was that after this eight weeks ended I would never want to be near another law office in my entire life. Luckily, I wish nothing of the sort at this point, and in fact this internship has reaffirmed to me that a legal career is the career for me.

From start to finish everything I experienced was enjoyable, and only served to further my interest in the field of law. Mr. Goffinet and I sat down to speak about my work on the last day with the firm, and during that conversation I began to reflect one more time on my experiences. As I reflected and as Mr. Goffinet spoke about my work, both my confidence and my excitement about what a future in the legal field might hold for me grew vastly. I am aware that this is only the first step in a long journey, but as I have mentioned many times before in this paper, every step is a vital necessity and is equally important.