



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF DUNCAN & CRAIG ASSOCIATES

When I was at U of A Law School in Edmonton, the search for articles, the interview process and getting to know the firm you were going to work for were all hit and miss affairs. Some of the larger Edmonton firms came to campus to interview prospects but most firms expected grads to come to them so we blanketed the city with resumes hoping to get called for an interview.

Then, when you landed an interview, the discussion was usually more about the partner doing the interviews than anything else. One partner I spoke to shoved my unexamined resume aside and thrust his business card across the desk saying, “Here’s my resume. This is what counts around here.” Another swivelled around in his high backed leather chair, thumped the mahogany panelling on the wall behind him and said, “It takes a heck of a lot of hard work to pay for this.”

When you finally secured articles no one thought too much more about you. It was, “Nice to meet you but you don’t know enough to do anything useful around here so concentrate on getting your degree and we’ll see you when you graduate.”

That probably explains why summer jobs in firms weren’t plentiful. One of my classmates did work for a firm, during school and in the summer, but she was an exception — she’d been an estate administrator in England and had real, marketable skills. The rest of us spent our last year of law school

knowing virtually nothing about the firm we would join and wondering what we had gotten ourselves into.

Some thirty odd years later, one Edmonton firm is recruiting its junior lawyers in a very different fashion and, if the testimony of the three new hires I spoke to is indicative, they are getting it right.

Duncan & Craig LLP Lawyers and Mediators, known locally as “D & C,” was founded in 1894. Currently, D & C has approximately 50 lawyers and an equal number of support staff. A key value of the firm is commitment to the community and, on its 100th anniversary in 1994, the firm established the Laurel Awards which are given annually to local, non-profit organizations that show exceptional innovation and creativity. The firm also provides scholarships to the legal assistant programs at Grant MacEwan College.

Mark Demas is a brand new lawyer at D & C – he was called to the bar just three weeks before this interview – but his connection with the firm goes back to first year law in 2006 when worked there for the summer. “I would call it articling light. It’s more relaxed than articling,” Demas said. There’s no official agenda for summer students — they do not rotate through the firm’s departments they way articling students do. Instead they are expected to sample everything the firm has to offer. “You are really encouraged to get around and sit in on as much as you can — attend discoveries and client meetings, go watch trials or chambers applications, do the research work you are given and seek out the type of work you are interested in,” Demas said.

Demas appreciated being included in the firm's summer social events. "We're quite a social firm. You help with planning summer events — the golf tournament, the family picnic and the firm's part in the city-wide Corporate Challenge Event. You get to bond with more people in the office," said Demas. Social opportunities continued after the summer was over as well. The firm sent Demas email invitations to its winter functions and he played on the firm's hockey team. "You are always kept in the loop," Demas said.

Demas sees several advantages from summering. One was getting to know the firm early on. "The firm gets to know who you are. It's a pre-screening for articles," Demas said. He must have passed muster because he experienced another advantage — he was offered articles in January 2007, half way through second year law school. "I didn't have to go through the article process which I understand is quite stressful," Demas said. Finally, he felt right at home when he did report for articles. "You are returning rather than starting. That's substantial. I just picked up where I left off," he said.

Monic Pratch, who had just celebrated the first anniversary of her call to the bar when I spoke to her, has been at D & C for five years. "I did the joint LLB/MBA at U of A and I summered after my first year of law. Then I worked there part time the next three years and summered with them every summer," Pratch said. This experience turned her legal career around. "Frankly, I didn't like first year law. It wasn't that interesting but I came to summer at D & C and loved it. I loved the practice side of things and I found some really passionate lawyers here that I loved to tag along with. I really started to love law during that summer," Pratch said.

Pratch appreciates the firm's commitment to community service. "I volunteered consistently throughout undergrad and that's an important part of me," Pratch said. She remembers the surprised reaction of students at other firms when she told them she left the office every Thursday at 4:30 to teach dance classes to underprivileged kids, and she was delighted to discover that D & C officially supports such efforts. "There's a non-billable target for associates that we're supposed to strive to. That includes things like community involvement or continuing legal education. I haven't heard of it anywhere else," she said.

The firm's strong social bonds also impress Pratch. "I want to like where I'm working and the people I'm working with. D & C really supports that," Pratch says. Associates are encouraged to do things together, she says, and a group of them are going golfing once a week. "I think it helps you buy into the partnership mentality as opposed to an 8 to 6 job," says Pratch.

Pratch also appreciates the direct input associates have into firm issues. D & C's partners meet once a month and four days later there is an associates meeting to which students

are invited. A partner briefs them on issues discussed at the partners' meeting and anything decided by the associates gets taken forward to the partners' meeting. Recently the associates raised concerns about the firm's post-articles mentorship program for junior lawyers. "Within two to three days the partnership decided to organize a half day mentorship retreat. We sat around and discussed how the program was going and how it could be better. It was a round table with 50 people. I thought that was unique," Pratch said.

Most importantly, Pratch loves the fact that the firm allows her to follow her own passions and develop her own career. "I have a real interest in Privacy Law and the firm fostered that. They sent me to expensive conferences and let me develop that area. I'm sure if I said tomorrow I want to do something different they'd be supportive and do what they could to accommodate that," Pratch said.

Malkit Atwal is the most senior associate I spoke to having just finished two years at the bar. Unlike the others, he did not summer at D & C. "I didn't make it but I had a really good feeling from the three lawyers who interviewed me so I kept their cards," Atwal said. A good deal of that good feeling came from the call he got telling him he did not get the summer job. "Joe Spelliscy called and said I wasn't successful but he asked me to apply for an articling position. He said they were impressed," Atwal remembers.

Atwal is impressed by the scope the firm gives to associates. Unlike most junior lawyers, Atwal has already participated in hearings in high appellate courts — the Northwest Territories Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Canada. "At the same time I was getting ready for Ottawa on the Supreme Court file with John Hope, QC, one of the other juniors was working with him on a three week QB trial here in Edmonton and another was in a three week trial in Calgary with another partner. Junior lawyers are given so much opportunity," Atwal said.

Atwal also appreciates the fact that the firm does not pressure associates to bring in work. "The biggest thing at this point in our careers is to hone our skills and become a good lawyer. The rest will follow," Atwal said.

All three associates said D & C is genuinely committed to work/life balance. "I had a death in the family earlier this year. They said go home and give them all my files. That was the managing partner," said Pratch. Demas' oldest son — at high school in Lethbridge, AB — was playing on championship teams. "They won provincials. I was there for all the big games," said Demas.

What a change from thirty years ago — a firm that goes the distance when recruiting and three associates who wouldn't be anywhere else. Atwal summed it up best. "It's a great firm. I don't think it could be any better," he said.