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Dallas Firm Cuts Billables for First-Years

Strasburger & Price aims to enhance on-the-job training

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Strasburger & Price's
Dan Butcher

Dallas-based Strasburger & Price is cutting billable requirements for first-year lawyers to allow more time for associate training.

Strasburger & Price, with 183 attorneys, is reducing its standard billable-hour expectations from 1,920 hours to 1,600 hours.

At the same time, it will require incoming associates to spend 550 hours shadowing senior attorney mentors, participating in training sessions and working on pro bono projects.

The adjustment is designed to enhance on-the-job training while relieving clients from some of the burden of paying for it.

New associates will continue earning at least \$140,000 as long as they meet the revised billable-hour demands and the training requirements.

The law firm, which has five offices in Texas, one in Washington and one in Mexico City, hires about seven associates each year.

The law firm decided to make the change based on "ongoing dialogue" its leaders have with associates, said managing partner Dan Butcher. Associates expressed concern about fulfilling training requirements and providing pro bono work while also meeting the 1,920-hour requirement. "This is a more realistic goal," Butcher said.

The reduction potentially is "significant" in relieving billing pressure for first-year associates, said Richard Gary, former chairman of Thelen Reid & Priest and now principal of Gary Advisors, a law firm consultancy in Tiburon, Calif.

He added, however, that the training demands will keep associates busy.

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"It's not as if they can leave the office in the afternoon to go play in the local softball league," he said.

The move also sends a message to budget-conscious clients that has marketing value for the firm, Gary said.

HIGH DISSATISFACTION

The new policy at Strasburger & Price comes at a time of high dissatisfaction among associates at the nation's big law firms. Earlier this year, a group of more than 100 law students from top schools across the country called on big firms to reduce billable-hour requirements and implement balanced-life programs, at reduced pay to associates, if necessary.

According to NALP, a nonprofit organization that tracks legal job placement, nearly 80 percent of associates leave large firms by the time they are in their fifth year of practice.

At least one firm has completely done away with billable-hour requirements for first-year associates. In August, Ford & Harrison, with 190 attorneys, announced that it no longer was requiring billable-hour minimums from its new attorneys.

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