

Your Online Presence

BEING ACTIVE ONLINE HAS MOVED FROM A NO-NO TO A NECESSITY FOR LAW STUDENTS BUT IT NEEDS TO BE DONE RIGHT BY PAUL MCLAUGHLIN



IN 2006, the year before he attended the University of Western Ontario Law School, Omar Ha-Redeye began a blog entitled *Law is Cool*. “At the time the legal industry was very much behind the times and had a very minimal online presence,” says Ha-Redeye, a principal at Fleet Street Law in Toronto and an adjunct law professor at several post-secondary institutions. “But I had a background in communications and PR before switching to law and saw a blog as a way to become established in the industry and put myself on the map.”

He says that, at the time, law schools made it clear that “if you do anything online, if you blog, your career prospects are over. You will not get a job.”

He found the opposite to be true. “It made my career,” he says of the blog that grew to be the largest law school website in Canada. It had more than 50 contributors from law schools across Canada within a few years of its inception. “I graduated in 2010, one of the toughest times in the last decade to find a job [due to the fallout from the 2008 recession]. Law firms were contracting. There were no hirebacks after articling. I believe my blog, and the many contacts I made from having it, helped me [obtain employment] almost right away.”

The attitude of law schools towards blogs and other online initiatives has “done a complete about-face, almost a 360 since then,” he says, to a point where there are now so many legal blogs the question for students or young lawyers has become, “How do you differentiate yourself now that everybody is blogging?”

One answer, says Anita Lerek, President and General Counsel of recruitment agency Advocate Placement Ltd. in Toronto, is that, rather than blogging, students should

consider posting comments on existing sites that focus on issues in which they have “interests and passions, say in human rights or the environment or criminal law.” To Lerek, it’s essential for students or young lawyers seeking employment to “go to [an existing site] rather than sit and wait for people to come to you.” Too many, she says, post on their own sites but “they’re basically talking to themselves.”

Steve Matthews at Stem Legal Web Enterprises in Vancouver, who established the Canadian Law Blog Awards (known as the Clawbies) in 2006, obviously encourages blogging. “It’s one way to differentiate yourself from maybe 50 other students all competing for a few positions,” he says. But he cautions students to “have a modest voice” in their writing. “You want to be conservative to make sure you don’t say something that could have a negative effect on the process from moving from articling student to practising lawyer.”

Matthews strongly recommends students contribute to CanLII Connects. “Let’s say your prof has liked a case summary you’ve written. You can post that on CanLII, which can help to build your profile.”

A presence on social media is one obvious requirement for any student seeking employment. “If you’re not on the Internet you don’t exist,” says Warren Bongard, President and Co-founder of ZSA Legal Recruitment in Toronto.

But only one site is a must for students.

Says Lerek, “LinkedIn is critical to be on but it’s more than sufficient.”

Ha-Redeye says a LinkedIn profile is more important than a résumé. “If they’re not on LinkedIn I assume they’re either hiding something or not legitimate. It’s also more reliable and accurate than a résumé. I’ve seen studies that say about 70 per cent of résumés have embellishments in them. On LinkedIn, your peers will know if you’re magnifying your information so people tend to [tell the truth] there.”

Blogging, Bongard says, offers students “a way to display their writing skills, which is another way to showcase your abilities.” Although he says many law students are good writers, he emphasizes the need to make any written communication free of errors. “I judge people about how good or bad they give email [or] submit a job application.” Badly written or typo-laden communications “can reveal whether they’re someone with attention to detail,” an obvious requirement for a lawyer.

Ha-Redeye also believes blogging and other written initiatives provide prospective employers with an example of a skill necessary for a young lawyer. “The vast majority of junior associates are engaged in the process of reading a large amount of documents and processing and articulating the concepts [in the material],” he says. “If you are able to demonstrate your ability to have already done that online, you’re halfway there to being hired.”