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Associate **STRESS** Disorder Stop them before they bill again

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Greedy associates care. They care about pay, perks and prestige, and whether their firm is as hot as the competition. Online, they post the latest in salaries, bonuses, mergers and layoffs, with Internet links to news stories announcing major law firm changes.

Greedy associates kvetch. They complain when they have to spend Labor Day in the office while their partners enjoy the weekend. And they complain when the partners are in

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the office: "Which is worse: knowing the partner for whom you are working is enjoying his Labor Day with his family, or having him hovering to make sure you are working diligently on his project?"

Greedy associates are comedians. In fact, they're wiseasses. "Newbies" who don't know the lingo are educated quickly. Earlier this month, when a law student already on the lookout for *next* year's summer associate position (we told you they cared!) inquired about a Long Island firm's "prestige," the first response was, "A Long Island firm and you're asking about prestige?" Sometimes, "GAs" will even joke about themselves, their lives — even their sex lives, or the lack thereof — and their lot in life.

And they do it all publicly, online, in a series of "Greedy Associates" clubs, or "boards," mostly hosted by Yahoo. Originally the boards

served to exchange information about the perks offered by large firms (called "BIGLAW" online). They still do, but they've expanded well beyond this limited scope. There are regional GA boards, specialized boards, boards for summer associates and lawyers with kids, even a "Distressed Partners" board that's attracted recent attention. The most popular and interesting is "RealGAs," which since its founding in June has had 7,000 posts, often running at well over 100 per day. RealGAs has posts about salaries, bonuses and raises. But discussions also range widely, from the pros and cons of punitive damages, to where to vacation in Greece, to how various GAs are getting along with their significant others.

RealGAs, like all the Yahoo boards, is open to anyone who wants to sign on, for no fee. We both enrolled, one of us posting, the other an

occasional lurker. RealGAs spun off from the original "Greedy Associates" board (the RealGAs call it the "Icky Board," or simply "IB"), when the original version became flooded with yelling and static, such as posts in all capital letters which "flamed" all those who dared to disagree.

It's impossible to profile the average Greedy Associate with accuracy, since people don't identify themselves by their real names. To do so would make it impossible for a candid discussion of what's troubling them — and their law firms — and "out" those associates looking to change jobs. Still, it's possible to make some generalizations, particularly about those who post rather than just lurk.

Greedy associates are egotistical, sharp-tongued, prideful, competitive and bright. Mostly bright. And young — young enough to

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be egotistical, sharp-tongued, prideful and competitive about how bright they are — and to constantly compare their intelligence to others. Typical is their intentional misspelling of the word “REdiculous,” their creation of “sock puppet” alter egos who are free to express themselves sarcastically, even scatologically, in ways their usual identities would not, and their online identities themselves: Lady Greediva, postassociatestressdisorder, and lh8jfkjr, who after the Kennedy scion’s death changed his moniker to lh8edjfkjr. Either way, he’s known online as “Plate” because his online name looks like a vanity license plate.

Greedy associates are also disillusioned. They grouse about doing work paralegals could easily handle, far from the action and even farther from the courtroom, on cases they don’t choose for clients they don’t know or, even worse, don’t like. The irony is that these highly intelligent young lawyers — many, if one can believe their claims, from the top of their class at the best law schools — feel they’re being wasted on tasks better suited for “lesser” beings. But though many would deny it online, beneath the hard shell of cynicism and sarcasm — the side they tend to show on the GA boards — lurk some sensitive souls.

Greedy associates worry. They worry about the meaning of their lives, why they’ve chosen a profession that forces them to give up so much for, well, so much at least economically.

When law firms become revolving doors in which values and traditions give way to free market economics and the question “What have you done for me lately?”, associates, at the bottom of the food chain, usually feel the pressure the most. They are expected to perform quickly, at a high level of competence, and with a billable hours quota that makes the 40-hour work week look like chump change. Using the benchmark suggested by several authorities that lawyers can convert a *maximum* of 70 percent of their time into billable hours, a yearly 2,100 billable hour requirement translates into 3,000 hours of time — 60 hours a week for 50 weeks, 10 hours a day six days a week, *every* week. One RealGAs associate put it this way: It’s like the high school competition she used to hate — swim under water for as long as possible, and see who can hold their breath and stay under water the longest.

‘A MOMENT OF DESPAIR’

The overriding reality that most associates readily recognize, whether they enjoy their work or not, is that their large law firms are big businesses first and associations of professionals second. At many firms, mentoring long ago gave way to the demands of billing. And the revolutionary increase of lateral hires in the last 15 years has caused a fundamental erosion of the concept of law firm loyalty.

The Greedy Associates boards do more than provide an outlet for the frustrations of the law business. They also allow participants

to create their own group culture. Even though people’s true identities remain anonymous, many online comments and most of the messages we’ve received “off-list” show that GAs are fiercely loyal to and protective of each other. To many, the culture of the board, and their loyalty to its participants, is more real than what they find in their own firms.

But for some, it’s not enough. Wrote one Greedy Associate in a moment of despair:

“Does anyone else on this board feel like being a lawyer in BIGLAW is slowly but surely deadening them inside? It is such mind-numbing work that I feel like I’m losing my sense of humor and find it very difficult to appreciate anything, either inside or outside work. Pure ambivalence. I’ve gotta get out before I go completely postal. FYI - I’m stuck here working with a partner to turn a document that does not need to be turned. It’s in an area of law for which I have no experience that I got roped into because I’m a new lateral and haven’t learned the politics yet. When does this end? I’m sick of being an adult and having most of my waking life dictated by people I don’t like or respect, doing work for which there is no passion. My fantasy of getting up from my desk, walking out of my office, going to the head of my department and quitting to be a bartender is sounding extremely appealing.

“HELP!”

We must find a way to give those who swim under water a chance to come up for air. ■