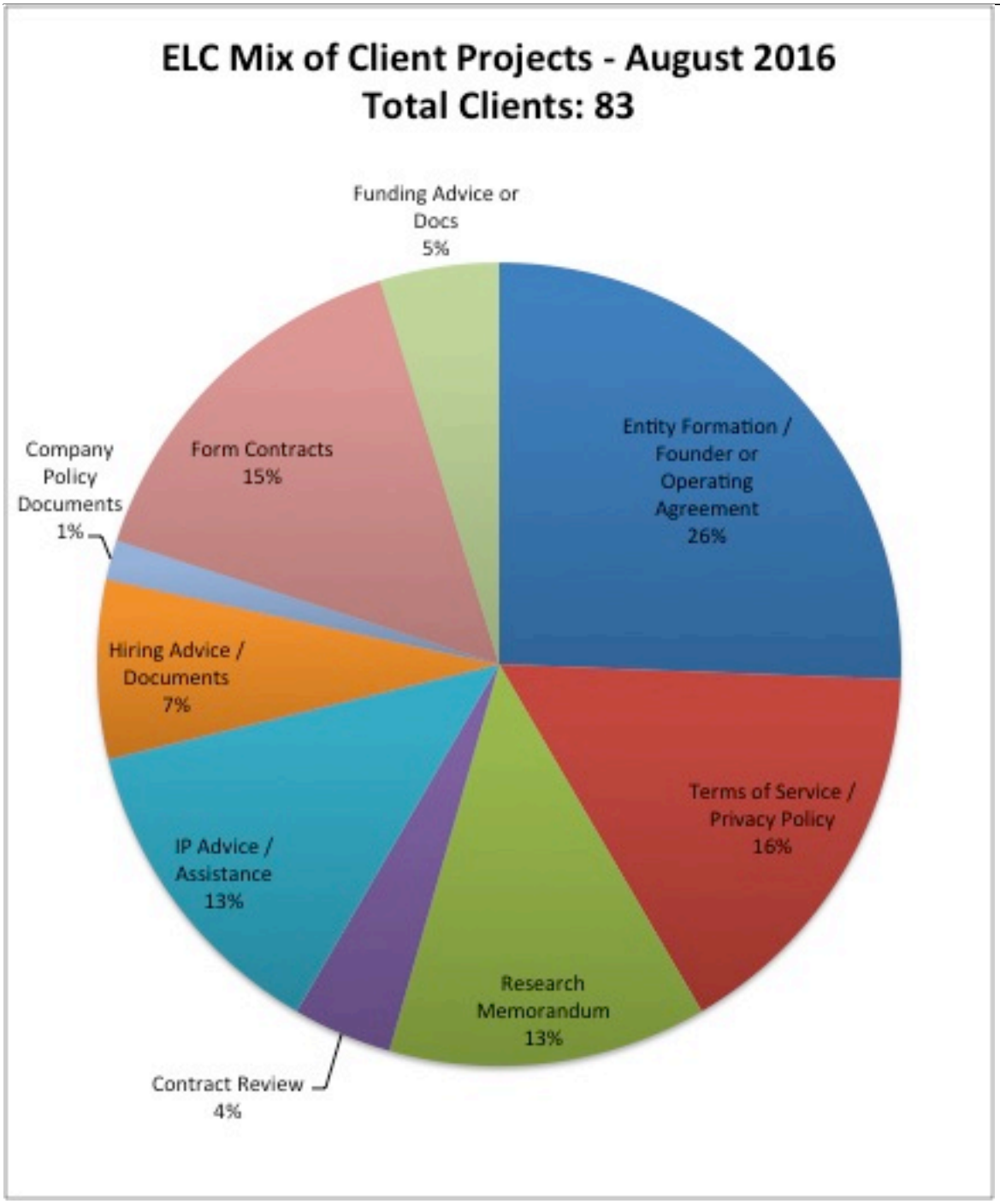
Ready to Dive In: How to Prepare Lawyers for In-House Careers

Career Development

We all know that the field of law is changing. Unlike 20 or even 10 years ago, many recent law firm graduates are taking jobs in-house, and many corporate legal departments are comfortable training recent graduates instead of hiring them directly from law firms. Without question, law firms provide an incredible training ground for a career in-house. However, as the marketplace drives opportunity, law schools are responding by creating innovative programs that allow law students to build the skills they'll need to begin working in-house immediately upon graduation.

Laura Lee Norris, director of the Entrepreneurs' Law Clinic (ELC) and assistant clinical professor at Santa Clara University School of Law, saw an opportunity to fuel the Silicon Valley ecosystem with lawyers who would, upon graduation, have the practical skills and abilities to dive head first into startup legal work. The ELC is a graded transactional clinic in which law students provide at least 150 hours of pro bono legal services for real-life startup companies and entrepreneurs under the supervision of the ELC Director and adjunct professors. The clinic meets twice a week — once for a lecture on startup law, and once for "case rounds." In case rounds, the students present issues relating to their client project for discussion and collaboration with other classmates. Aside from those two meetings, all work is completed on the students' own time.



As demonstrated in the chart below, ELC students work on a variety of transactions that are crucial to startup companies: business entity formation, operational contracts, company policies, website terms of service, and intellectual property licensing. In addition to the obvious benefit for the students, in the 10 semesters ELC has been offered at Santa Clara's Schools of Law, the ELC has provided free legal services to 90 companies in its immediate communities — an impressive contribution equaling to over US$1 million in legal fees. The dual benefit nature of the program is key to its success and, undoubtedly, has contributed to the perception shift in the way start-up employers view recent graduates.

The ELC also creates some synergies and interesting opportunities for recent graduates and employers alike. For example, Amanda Demetrus took the ELC in Fall 2013. Upon graduation, she went to work for Maya Blumenfeld, a startup lawyer and ELC. As Demetrus explains, "I knew that once I received my joint JD/MBA from Santa Clara, I wanted to work with startup companies. The Entrepreneurs' Law Clinic helped to set me on that path. Not only was I able to work directly with

startup clients through the clinic, but I also met an ELC mentor who was a startup lawyer in a small private practice. She hired me as an intern because of my experience in the ELC, and I'm now an associate with her firm."

For her part, Blumenfeld echoes the sentiments about the ELC's benefits from an employer's perspective: "As a mentor at the Entrepreneur's Law Clinic, and founding attorney of Blumenfeld Legal, a Silicon Valley venture and startup boutique practice, I find working with graduates of the clinic particularly valuable and enjoyable. The clinic affords students an opportunity to learn firsthand about the intricacies of directly working with clients. It also allows them to develop their contract-drafting skills, which are quintessential to the practice of transactional law, and be confident about their choice to practice in the field. The interns I have hired from the program were well prepared thanks to their experiences in the clinic."

The ELC also helps students from non-traditional backgrounds enter the workforce. Given the focus on diversity issues permeating technology corporations, companies benefit from recruiting such candidates. Dariia Skrementova, a Santa Clara LLM student, took the ELC in Summer 2015. As a recent transplant to the Bay Area, Skrementova used her experience at the ELC to grow her network locally. "I entered the IP LLM program at Santa Clara knowing that I wanted to work with Silicon Valley companies. My ELC mentor made an introduction that lead to my current internship, where I work on projects similar to those I completed in the ELC, such as business entity formation, trademarks, and contract drafting," Skrementova explains.

The ELC experience also proves to be valuable for attorneys who choose to work at law firms serving startup clients. Blayne Kercher took the ELC in its inaugural semester. After graduation, Kercher took a job as an associated a QWCooper, a law firm representing both startups and established companies in the Bay Area. His experience with the ELC was a selling point for the job — the founder of the firm is Quentin Cooper, is an ELC mentor and adjunct professor.

As Kercher explains the benefits of the ELC, "Participating in the Entrepreneurs' Law Clinic helped me understand the motivations of my startup clients, and how to best counsel them to achieve their business goals while minimizing legal risk. The experience helped me market myself to firms once out of school, and continues to help me serve my clients today as an associate in a private practice founded by one of the ELC professors. When I think back on the opportunities the ELC provided, I'm very grateful that I was given that exposure and training, and I don't think I'd be where I am without it."

From the employer perspective, some of the soft skills the students are exposed to squarely fall into the emotional intelligence category — skills that are hard to teach and are imperative when talking about overall company "fit." Eugenia Buzogly, who took the ELC in 2015, had the opportunity to learn valuable in-house attorney skills, including writing business-friendly emails to key company stakeholders, how to implement creative legal solutions to novel business issues, and how to draft clear and concise agreements.

After graduation, Buzogly started her legal career off as the sole in-house attorney at tech start-up Druva, a company creating a simpler cloud platform solution for data availability and information governance. "Participating in the Entrepreneur's Law Clinic was a unique and invaluable experience for my current role. Not only did I learn about an array of legal issues that start-ups and mature corporations face, I also got to apply law to the real-world scenarios and get an appreciation for the counsel's role in moving the business forward," Buzogly explains.

ELC clients are equally as pleased when collaborating with ELC students. Scoot Science, a company founded by Santa Clara faculty that uses unmanned underwater drones to collect and process data about our oceans “turned to the ELC to assist us with legal questions core to our business, such as entity formation, intellectual property, and regulatory compliance.”

Bridgeatheltic, a San Francisco-based startup building high-performance training tools for coaches and athletes who compete at all levels “received strategic guidance from the students in ELC, which was clearly communicated and well-tailored to the stage of our business.”

Tico Coffee Roasters, a sustainable boutique company specializing in importing exotic coffees and the finest teas from round the world, found that “the law clinic is a great resource for startups of all kind, not just what people would consider ‘traditional’ Silicon Valley tech startups. The ELC students took the time to meet in person to understand our needs, and provided very professional advice.”

As the program grows, so do the opportunities awarded to law students. No matter what path students follow after graduating from law school, undoubtedly, the practical skills clinics such as the ELC provide are integral to helping recent lawyers add value to corporations right from the get go.

More importantly, the ELC provides students with the confidence of knowing that they are entering the workforce having worked on the types of projects they are likely to face in their first day on the job. As the tides of the legal profession continue to shift, we predict that the trend set by the ELC will only grow and flourish.

Olga V. Mack

Fellow

CodeX

Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat, Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities. She is working on her next books: Visual IQ for Lawyers (ABA 2024), The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle (Globe Law and Business 2024), and Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data (Globe Law and Business 2024).

Katia Bloom

Commercial Lawyer and Associate General Counsel

ForgeRock

Katia Bloom is a fast-paced and strategic commercial lawyer. Currently, she is the associate general counsel at ForgeRock. Previously, she headed up legal for Avira, Inc., was a founding partner at E Squared Law Group, advising many start-up clients and was in-house counsel at Anesiva. She is actively involved in the Association of Corporate Counsel and a number of organizations promoting

women in the legal profession.