

Recap: “The Life of a Start-Up Attorney”

By Alejandro Almodovar, J.D. Candidate 2017 | September 29, 2015

So what does a start-up attorney actually do? If you are like me, when I first heard the term I had no idea what the practice entailed. On September 13, 2015, Jay Purcell of Goodwin Procter and Morgan Sawchuck of Fenwick & West, two experienced and successful start-up attorneys, discussed their practices and their typical day to a full room of interested UC Berkeley Law students. The event was hosted by the Berkeley Center for Law, Business and the Economy.

Start-up attorneys have the ability to help their clients achieve success. Typically, the clients they represent have great ideas, but many do not know how to run a company, let alone how to start one. These attorneys assist clients with the entire range of legal issues facing young companies, such as forming the companies themselves. Steve Jobs, for example, was once one of these clients. With the help of his start-up attorneys, he was able to turn his garage-operated company into one of the largest and most well-known corporations in the world.

Purcell and Sawchuck discussed how their practice ranges from small companies that have only just been incorporated to companies with valuations in the billions. As a result of this diversity of clientele, start-up attorneys must be “jacks-of-all-trades.” They must be able to understand each of their clients’ products and ideas across a range of sectors. It is only with this understanding that they are able to facilitate every legal need of their clients, from incorporation and raising money, to licensing products, issuing stock, and executing M&A transactions and IPOs.

In addition, if startup lawyers cannot answer a particular question for a client, they act as facilitators connecting the client with the appropriate specialist. The practice encompasses so many different aspects of service for clients that no day is ever the same. On Monday morning a startup attorney could be working on a billion dollar merger, while Tuesday could be spent offering advice to early stage companies and answering quick questions.

Because many of their clients are small and just starting, Purcell and Sawchuck explained that one of their favorite parts of the job is the opportunity it provides to form strong relationships with their clients and occasionally become good friends on speed-dial. Their clients have an intense and contagious passion for their work that makes for a rewarding and successful partnership.

As start-up attorneys, the two find fulfillment in knowing that they can play a part in their client’s success. After all, who knows when the next Steve Jobs will walk through the door?