

# Hitting the books

*Despite the economy, firms are paying for workers to go back to school*

RACHEL BERNSTEIN | STAFF

**M**atthew Gorra recently received his master's in business administration from Loyola College in Maryland's Sellinger School of Business and Management.

But the degree didn't cost him a cent.

Gorra, a corporate and finance attorney, is one recipient of a scholarship from his employer, DLA Piper. Each year, the Baltimore law firm awards up to three associates the cost of tuition, books, supplies and travel for assignments for graduate business degree programs.

DLA Piper believes that lawyers with business backgrounds become better positioned as trusted, strategic business advisers who grasp the many opportunities and challenges clients face, not just the legal aspects of their business, said Heather Reid, a marketing manager for the firm.

The law firm is still supporting its scholarship program in the down economy, and continues to maintain its tuition cap of roughly \$45,000 per award recipient. "The best place to spend money in this economy is in our employees," Reid said.

Despite the ailing economy that has triggered corporate budget cuts, many companies want to retain their employees and build their worth with continuing education and training opportunities. Continuing education can provide big returns from heightened employee productivity to increased job satisfaction, said Jim Meade, director of permanent placement services for Robert Half International in Baltimore.

"I think that if you plan to hold onto employees long term, you have to show that commitment," Meade said. While Meade said he's seen some companies scaling back on tuition reimbursement for additional degrees because of the economy, many of those same companies are flexible on tuition compensation when situations in staffing become competitive.

Gorra's new degree — made possible with a full scholarship of as much as

\$45,000 over two and a half years — certainly brought him a new level of job satisfaction. "I always wanted to pursue an MBA," he said. "While law is certainly my profession, I wanted to expand being a legal adviser, and gain knowledge and insight to provide business context and

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advise them as a business adviser."

Shelly Ford, head people person of the **Brick Cos.**, says the Edgewater-based property management company encourages its full-time employees to attend seminars and local skill-building sessions. The company also doles out education reimbursements of up to \$2,000. The company handles these reimbursements on a case-by-case basis.

Ford said that even in hard economic times, continuing education is a benefit that the Brick Cos. will maintain. In fact, she said, the company has been pushing for more participation because of the economy and what it sees as the need to build employee value internally.

"We are actually even committed more to growing our own staff and training," Ford said. "Free golf would go away before continuing education."

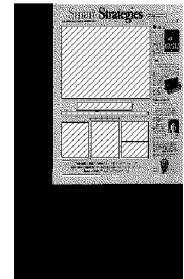
John Furman, regional vice president for Heery International's Baltimore office, is getting his accreditation in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) through Heery's scholarship program.

Heery, an architecture, interior design, engineering and construction management firm, has a tuition assistance program as well as internal continuing education classes.

The company added only the tuition assistance program within the past decade, Furman said. The program allows for a \$3,000 grant limit, which employees can re-apply for each year.

Heery also uses intranet to train its employees internally on the diverse facets of the company's duties and what's innovative in the industry.

The Heery programs also include free



online courses on trends in insurance and risks that employees can use to polish their skills and accreditations.

“Like my mom always said, they can’t take away your education,” Furman said. “It’s something you always have.”



**Baltimore companies, like many across the nation, are keeping employee education and training programs.**

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